

TALES FROM THE

# TAWI

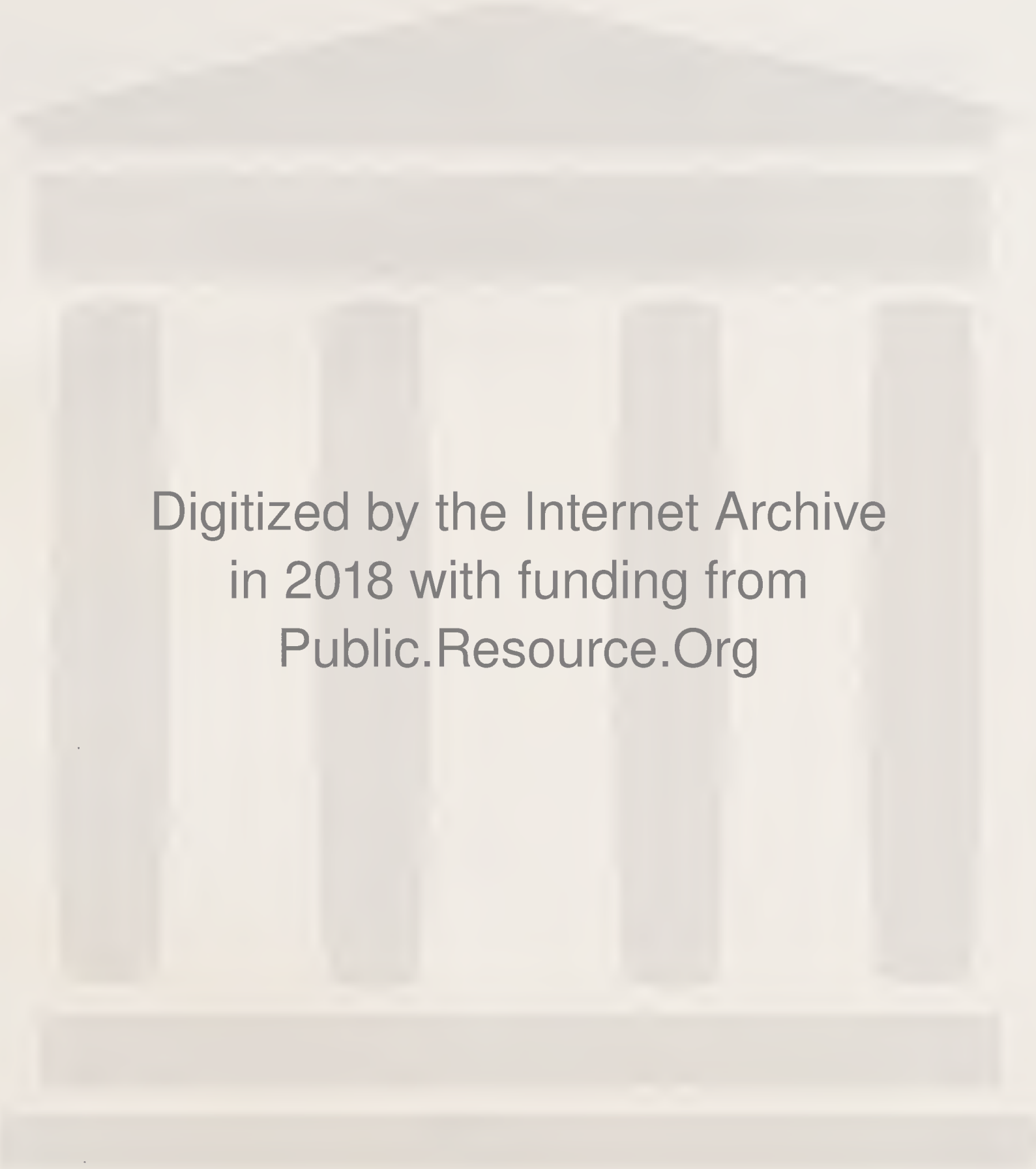
A Collection of Dogri Folk Tales

SUMAN K. SHARMA









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# **TALES FROM THE TAWI**

**(A COLLECTION OF DOGRI FOLK TALES)**

**Adapted by Suman K. Sharma**



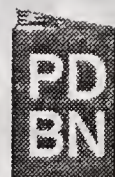
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**for Avni**





## PREFACE

Folk tales are such a droll way of telling the truth about people. The barb is there for all to see, but the pain associated with it is somehow transmogrified into the joy that comes from looking at a mirror. *Yes, that's me, with all the spots that make my identity!* The present collection is a humble attempt to evoke the Dogra way of life.

But who are Dogras? Traditionally, the Duggar land fell between the Ravi and the Chenab rivers. After the British signed a treaty with Maharaja Gulab Singh, the whole mountainous and sub-mountainous regions between the Satluj and the Chenab came to be called the Dogra land.

By and large, it is not a very hospitable terrain. Earth yields its bounty, but with a considerable effort on the part of the tiller. The monsoon plays truant quite often. Summers are daunting and the winters no less in their severity. In not too distant a past, hunger stalked at the door. The harshness of life was further aggravated by a strict feudatory order, replicated endlessly. An autocratic raja drove his subjects as he willed; so did a father his offspring, and a man his wife.

The Dogras, then, had of necessity to be territorial, hardy and robust. Soldiering and tilling the land came natural to them. A strong belief in gods, goddess and other supernatural beings brought them not only relief from the tedium of mundane existence, but it frequently gave them the strength to stand and fight against all odds. When the reality became unbearable, the make-believe provided a ready refuge: trees talked, heavenly fairies gave succour to the needy and the Almighty Shiva wandered in the streets with His Consort to shower His munificence on the righteous.

Religion is a recurrent motif in most of the Dogri folk tales. A General in the midst of the battlefield refuses to break his fast till the deity himself comes to his rescue (*Chenas*), *Parmandal* and *Sudh Mahadev* are myths related to the sacred places so named. *Charity* and *A People's Destiny* describe Gods and Goddesses interacting directly with the mortals and the happy culmination of the events. In *Bharua*, the *Miser*, a village yokel has the better of Lord Krishna!

Belief in the supernatural closely follows religion. It has been put to good use in fables as also to provide comic relief. In *Fragrant Flower*, the



siblings transformed into a mango tree and a flowering *chameli* vine make their father realize how cruel he has been to them and to their mother. *Union is Strength* is a telling fable of how the meekest of the meek may rise against a tyrant and put an end to his cruelty. *Sail Patthar* is a different kind of tale though. Heavily depending on supernatural effects, it describes the cataclysmic effect of the discovery of an unsuspecting husband that his equally innocent wife has been seduced by an evil stranger. *A Marriage Party of Ghosts* is a merry tale full of ghosts who are but so lively.

The Dogras are proud of their heritage. The tales of *Surgal Naag* and *Raja Bhair* are fine instances of mythicising pre-history.

Then there are the tales which afford a synoptic view of the Dogra ethos: *Magic of the Soil* (woman is prone to frailty), *The Iron Code* (a prospective husband must ensure that his bride-to-be is herself above board, and that there is no trace of waywardness in her blood), *The Untouchable* (qualities of personal hygiene and hospitality denote a person's worth, not his caste), *Darling Sister of Seven Brothers* (a wife can induce her husband to murder his own kin), *Dawanu Shah* (one must keep away from loan sharks) and *The Deed and the Intent* (a man with a clear conscience can commit no wrong). *Mahadevi*, *Sati Trippan* and *Supreme Sacrifice* are homilies on duties of individuals towards the community. *Baba Kaura* commemorates the courage of an old man, who by sacrificing his own life, makes the autocratic raja retract from his tyranny.

One wonders what sort of people the Dogras would have been if they did not have a funny bone. They enjoy having a good laugh at themselves. *Oh! But It Didn't Strike Us!* is the story of a simple village headman who opens his mouth at the wrong moment and invites trouble for himself and his companions. In *Never Shall I Touch the Hamper Again!* the old husband learns to his dismay that the pot of *kheer* which his wife had left in the house was not meant for him. The woman-protagonist of *The Day It Rained Fishes* manages to demonstrate effectively before her husband as to who among them is the smarter of the two. *Not the One-eyed Groom* lampoons the old tradition of parents depending blindly on intermediaries for finding a match for their offspring.

Dear Reader, I invite you, through these pages, to have a glimpse of the Dogra way of life....



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## *But it Didn't Strike Us!*

**Kishtawar** then used to be a separate state in the Dogra region. It is said that once the headman of a village across the river *Bhandar Koot* had to go to *Kishtawar* to deposit the *malia*<sup>1</sup> in the government treasury. Money used to be scarce then. You could kill a man and not find a rupee!

As it happened, the *malia* of that entire village amounted to just one rupee. The headman took along with him a few men of good judgment on the important mission. The river had to be crossed on a *kharoli*<sup>2</sup>. The men brooded how they would carry the precious coin over the raging river. If tied in a knot, the cloth might unwind and the coin thrown away. Pockets too could not be trusted, the rupee could as easily drop from one's pocket and fall into the river. After much thought, they came to a decision that the headman should carry the coin in his own mouth and open his jaws only when he had crossed the river.

The village headman mounted the ropeway and the attendant at the other end started to pull the rope. The worthy was in the middle of the river when one of his companions shouted to him, "Sir, is the rupee safe with you?" The headman yelled back in affirmation. But the moment he had opened his mouth, the silver coin fell down and was gone into the river. On reaching the other bank of the river, the headman beat his head in utter misery. His friends too were inconsolable. How were they to pay now the village tax? What answer would they give to Raja? They cried their hearts out but remained clueless.

At last, the feckless villagers presented themselves before the Raja of *Kishtawar*. They narrated to him their tale of woe. The Raja according to the prevailing custom, kept them as guests of the state. He also asked his vizier to inquire into the incident and find out how far it was true.

The vizier was a person of great wisdom. Seeing off the rustic guests to their allotted room in the royal sarai, he went on to give strict instructions to the attendants. "Give them sufficient atta, rice and daal, as much as they want.

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1. Land-tax

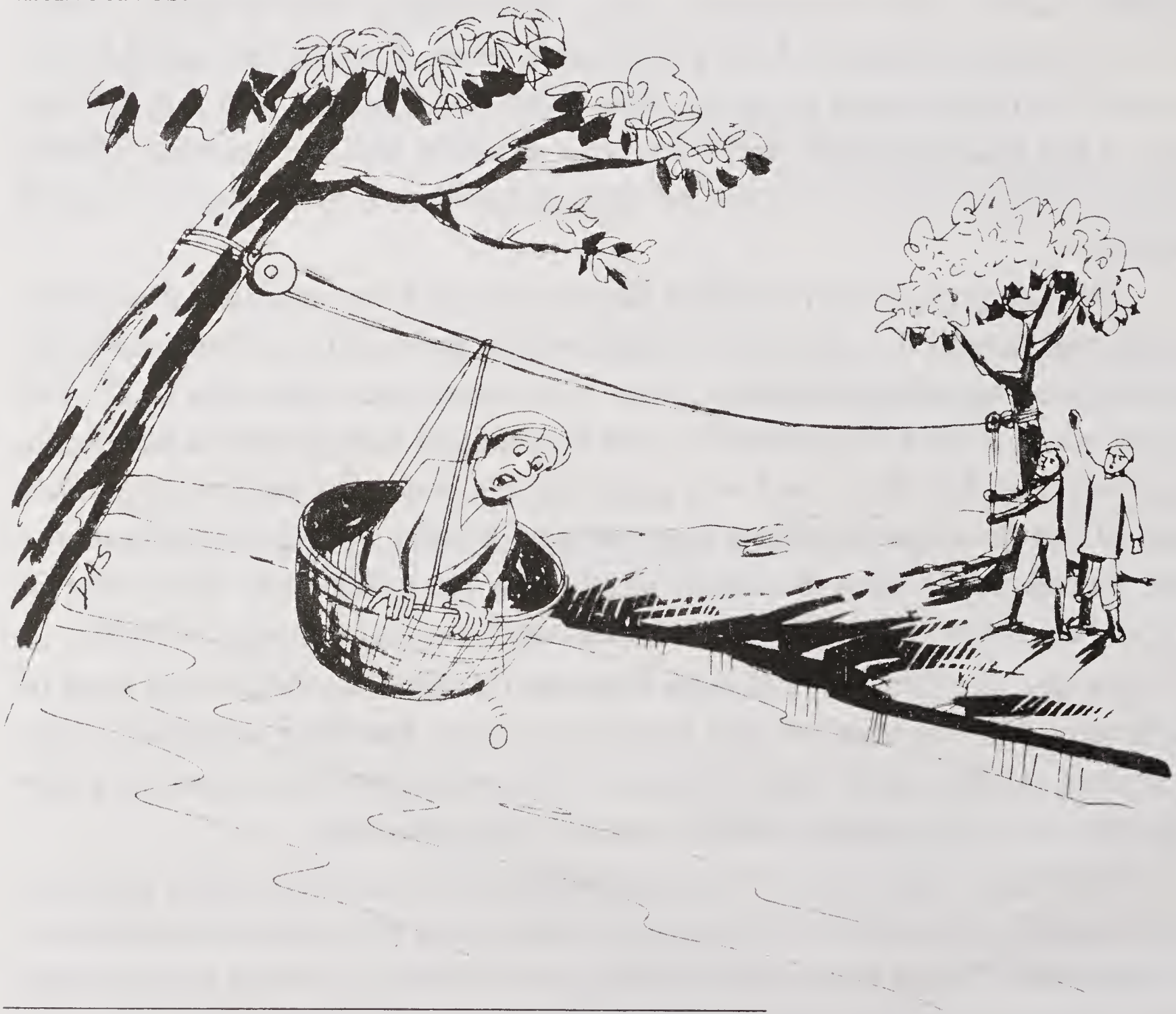
2. A contrivance made of rope and pulley to cross turbulent streams



Let there be plenty of *balan*<sup>1</sup> on the hearth and an earthen lamp burning brightly in their room all through the night,” the vizier ordered. “But they are not to be given anything to light the *chulha*<sup>2</sup>. And you will ensure that the household in the neighbourhood don’t help the yokels to light fire in the hearth!”

Unaware of the vizier’s secret orders, the headman and his villagers went begging for a live coal or a burning tinder from door to door, but were refused. They spent the night without eating anything, their dry rations untouched.

The following morning when the vizier saw that the guests had not used the rations, he asked the headman why they had not cooked meal for themselves.



- 
1. Tinder wood
  2. Traditional stove

“How could we cook when everyone refused to give us fire?” countered the harried villager.

“But didn’t you have a lamp burning in your room?” said the old vizier, “you could have lit a fire with that lamp.”

“Oh! But it didn’t strike any of us!”

The vizier went back to the Raja and told him that the villagers had indeed dropped the coin into the river. They were innocent folks, incapable of any guile.



## Chenas

**Thakur** Shivdarshan Singh was a scion of the *Suryavanshi* Jamwal Rajputs<sup>1</sup>. He was a close confidant of the Raja of Jammu. Though a mere *Kumaidan*<sup>2</sup> by rank, he was held in such a high esteem that the ruler did not as much as sneeze without first consulting him. The *Thakur*<sup>3</sup> stood tall with a well-knit body. Fair in complexion, he had large luminous eyes and awe-inspiring moustaches. In all, his proud bearing presented the very picture of virility. When ruffled, he could put fear in the stoutest of hearts with nothing but his raised voice; yet by nature he was very gentle. Guileless like Lord Shiva, he was a child with children and a man of wisdom among the grown ups. He could prove to be the worst of foes and the best of friends. His manly bearing was accentuated by his splendid attire: sparkling white *churidar*<sup>4</sup>, white *Khilka*<sup>5</sup>, a *zari*<sup>6</sup> worked *pustin*, saffron turban and traditional sandals embroidered with gold thread. Sporting a sword in his sash when he went to the court, strangers took him for a royal personage.

We are talking of the times when the state of Jammu and Kashmir was in a flux. The reign of Jammu was in the hands of Maharaja Gulab Singh<sup>7</sup>. The ambitious prince wanted to extend the frontiers of his domain as far as China and Tibet. Thakur Shivdarshan Singh was his trusted lieutenant. The Thakur camped in Jammu at a spot adjacent to Bhatti Talai, now the site of the Temple of the Dewans. He had rather a large family, comprising sons, grandsons, great grandsons — some eighty men and women altogether. No wonder, his peers teased him with the nickname of ‘the bull with a large brood’. Lord Narsingh was the Thakur’s family deity and the man was wholly devoted to

- 
1. The Rajputs of Jammu – Jamwals – claimed their origin from the mythical Surya, or the Sun god
  2. A minor feudatory
  3. A traditional honorific for a Rajput
  4. Leg-hugging tight pajamas
  5. A type of loose, long shirt falling over knees
  6. Ornamental work on a garment with gold-thread
  7. Founder of the last dynasty of the Dogra-rulers



Him. In the morning, he broke his fast only after performing *puja* and offering leaves of the sacred *tulsi*<sup>1</sup> to his Lord. This was one rule which he wanted to follow till the end of his days.

Those were the days of chivalry. Maharaja Gulab Singh was himself a brave soldier and he held courageous soldiers like Thakur Shivdarshan Singh in great esteem. The Raja of the remote hilly *jagir* of Pattal, a malicious Pathan, was inciting the Maharaja's foes. The Maharaja ordered Thakur Shivdarshan Singh to teach the errant Pathan a lesson.

On assuming the command, the Thakur took possession of a pair of *nakkaras*<sup>2</sup> and Shri Narsingh Dev's idol and issued orders for the long march. It was a daunting expedition, what with a mountainous terrain, thick jungles and fast flowing streams that had to be traversed; but so was the resolve of the commander and his men. The force reached its destination. The upstart vassal was attacked and vanquished. The Thakur sent back the happy message to Jammu and granted leave to his jubilant troops to celebrate their victory.

Maharaja Gulab Singh received the glad tidings from his *Kumaidan*. But he had little time to felicitate his commander. As luck would have it, the event had coincided with an urgent message from Vizier Zoravar Singh<sup>3</sup> who was on his way to conquer Laddakh and the adjoining region. The great General had sought additional forces. As a result, Maharaja Gulab Singh had to send a return message to *Kumaidan* Shivdarshan Singh through the Thakur's own runner that he was to move immediately towards Laddakh and provide relief to General Zoravar Singh.

Complying with the command of his overlord, the Thakur wound up his camp at Pattal and started the long march towards Laddakh. Swiftly passing one stage after the other, his force reached this side of the Burzal pass. The column had to advance further the following day, but when Shivdarshan Singh got up from his morning *puja*, he found to his dismay that he had exhausted his supply of *tulsi* leaves to be offered to his deity.

---

1. Sacred basil

2. Type of a drum used in olden times for ceremonial and official purpose

3. A renowned Dogra warrior



He found himself in a fix. If there were no more *tulsi* leaves to be served before the Lord as a *naivadya*<sup>1</sup>, then there was no way he could break his fast! The Thakur did not take anything throughout the day. Riders were sent the next day in search of the plant. But the sacred basil did not grow in that barren region. The horsemen returned empty handed. The second day also passed without Shivdarshan Singh eating anything, and the third day as well. On the fourth night, he was lying half awake in his bed, when the Thakur



1. Food offering to the Lord – devout Hindus break fast only after offering *naivadaya* to the deity

had a vision. He heard a distinct voice telling him, “Get up and search my mouth. How many days you will keep starving like this?” And verily, *the Kumaidan* inserted his hand into the idol’s mouth and got several *tulsi* leaves from the cavity. Overcome with gratitude, he bowed repeatedly before his Lord. At last, he offered the *naivadya* to Narsingh Dev and then sat down to break his fast.

While *the Kumaidan* was engaged in the battle for Laddakh, the Dewan in Jammu presumed that the valiant soldier would not return alive since he had to face a fierce fight being waged there. The scheming Dewan expelled the *Kumaidan’s* kin from their houses and appropriated the property for himself. There was no one to listen to the woes of the *Kumaidan’s* relatives since the Dewan had successfully banished them from any access to Maharaja Gulab singh.

But when *Kumaidan* Thakur Shivdarshan Singh returned victorious from Laddakh, the Maharaja honoured him publicly and bestowed on him many awards.

However, a different kind of homecoming awaited him when the valiant Thakur came out of the *mandi*<sup>1</sup>. His relatives who were waiting outside, told him how the Dewan had ill-treated them in his absence. The Thakur was moved to tears. He could have reported the matter to the Maharaja and got the wily Dewan executed. But he thought the better of it. “A ruler is kin to no one!” he thought, “And then it is not for the mortals to challenge destiny.” At a place 28 miles from the city of Jammu, near the village Takri Pindai on the banks of the river *Jajjhar*, and under the shadow of the sacred Trikuta hills, *Kumaidan* Thakur Shivdarshan Singh founded a new village for his immediate family and relatives. He named his abode ‘Charan Aas’ signifying his hope for the blessings of Mata Vaishno Devi. With the passage of time, the name of the village came to be shortened to ‘Chenas’.

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1. A meeting place, e.g. *Raje di mandi* (also called the Mubarak Mandi) in Jammu



## *Never Shall I Touch the Hamper Again*

**Once** there lived an aged couple in a village. The husband was a peasant. He toiled day in and day out in the fields, but all he got for his labours was bland and insipid food, which he took resignedly. The wife, on the other hand, was a glutton. To him she served but a dry *todah*<sup>1</sup>. And when the poor fellow went to till the farms, she feasted on delectable *khir*<sup>2</sup>, all by herself.

One day, when the old man was ploughing his fields, the handle of his ploughshare broke down. Disengaging his oxen, he came home. The house was empty. His wife had gone to the temple, where she used to spend most of her time.

The old man was hungry, as always. He entered the kitchen and caught the sight of the *khir* pot tucked in the hamper. It filled him with surprise. How could she have managed to cook such a delicacy in the state of utter penury that they lived! A sense of deep remorse overtook him. For all these years he had ignored her needs, mindful only of his own hunger and *todahs* she made for him. And here she was. Out of nothing his woman had conjured up a potful of *khir* to give him a surprise of his life. Trembling with sweet joy, the old peasant dipped a finger into the dish and sucked at it yearningly. It tasted heavenly, and before he could realize, the pot was empty. Burping with contentment, he recalled that he had a job to do. The village carpenter lived nearby. He went to him, got the plough repaired and was on his way to his fields.

Now the old woman returned home and found the *khir* pot empty. No one else, she surmised, but her husband it was who had done the deed. Not only had he robbed her of her favourite repast, but found out her little secret too! The codger had to be shown his place, she decided.

---

1. Coarse bread made of corn-flour

2. A delicacy made of milk, sugar and boiled rice

Even as she ground her teeth in anger, the sound of beating of a drum caught her ears. Hurriedly she came out of her home to see what it was. In the street a royal proclamation was being read out. The Queen, it said, was distraught by a painful abcess on her leg, which refused to go despite application of all the potions and poultices prescribed by eminent *vaid*s<sup>1</sup> of the kingdom. A big award now awaited any of the Raja's loyal subjects to come forth and rid the royal spouse of her misery.

On hearing the proclamation, the old woman nearly jumped with joy. She had heard that the Raja was a man of moods. He could shower favours one moment, and rob someone of his life, the next. Here was a chance to hurl her man before the fearsome Raja. Breaking through the crowd of idlers, she approached the town crier and told him, "Stop making a din, good man, and listen to me carefully. You have already found the man who can cure the Queen in one sitting. He is none else but my husband, who at this moment is tilling the yonder fields. Go, get him. He will pretend to you he doesn't know anything about medicine and that he is but a humble *kashtkar*<sup>2</sup>. Just don't pay heed to his words. Drag him to the palace if you have to, and present him before the King."

The Raja's men took the old woman at her word and approached the old man who was busy ploughing his fields. He tried hard to tell them that he was an ignorant peasant and did not know anything of medicine. But why would the soldiers listen to him! They hauled him to the King's presence.

It slowly dawned on the harried old man that he had invited all this misery on himself by gobbling that pot of *khir* without the permission of his wife. But he kept his counsel. Now there was no escape for him. Either he had to come up with a remedy for the Queen, or face the King's ire. A thought crossed his mind. He asked for some prickly *saroot*<sup>3</sup> blades and sat down brooding on his fate. Presently, the ailing Queen arrived, and sat before him. Shivering with fright, the old man eyed the Queen's boil and did not quite know what do with it. His mind had gone completely blank. A long time passed, but he did not as much as raise his finger. The Raja

- 
1. Traditional healing-men practicing Ayurveda system of medicine
  2. Tiller of soil
  3. A type of prickly grass







became impatient. “Quit this meandering and commence your cure, or else...” he thundered royally.

On listening to Raja’s angry words, the old man started waving a sharp *saroot* blade on the diseased spot of the Queen’s leg, muttering:

*“The handle broke and took me home;*

*Of gobbling khir the blame is mine.*

*Go, boil go, and send me home –*

*Never, I vow, never shall I touch the hamper again!”*

The more he recited his mantra, the more violently shook his hands. As luck would have it, the sharp point of a grass blade penetrated the ripe boil, causing it to burst open. The Queen got immediate relief. The King was elated and he rewarded the old man handsomely. On his way back home, he kept muttering:

*“The handle broke and took me home;*

*Of gobbling khir the blame is mine.*

*Go, boil go, and send me home –*

*Never, I vow, never shall I touch the hamper again!”*

## *Parmandal*

Nearly 1400 years ago, the Dogra region used to be one huge wilderness. To travel from one village to another was a great bother. Roads were marked by their absence and such trails as existed were as troublesome to the ordinary travelers, as to those whose fate it was to carry loads on their back. Even the *shikaris*<sup>1</sup> out on a hunt preferred to traverse the jungle path in the company of several followers rather than go alone.

Once it so happened that a prince of the *Baava*<sup>2</sup> went out on a hunting expedition. He had a vast retinue of 156 men, comprising archers, gunmen, drummers, watermen, vintners; and mixers of spices, cooks, chefs, dishwashers, and cleaners. As luck would have it, the hunting party could not make a single kill even after it had traveled as far as 16 *krohs*. That it was getting dark added to the woes of the men. They joked wryly with one another, “We’ve brought us cooks and chefs and *jheers*<sup>3</sup> too. To what purpose? There’s nothing to cook or clean here!”

Starving, they spent the night kicking at the bushes and plants in sheer frustration. One of them uttered dreamily, “If nothing else, a supper of *saag* and *todah* would have suited me fine. How I wish I were at home!” His companions laughed at the flight of his fancy. When the Raja overheard them, he could not stop himself from commenting, “*Talle mere phatte de’n, par ghar mere Dilli’n* – I’m in rags, but I hail from Delhi! What if we have not eaten for a day? Show a little fortitude. Let’s wait till day break!”

The day broke, and then there was eventide again. the hunters were nearly dying of hunger. To go deeper into the jungle was out of question, and yet, they could not think of going back out of shame. In the gathering darkness,

- 
1. Hunters
  2. A locality on the left bank of the river Tawi, named after an ancient king, Bahulochan. The remains of the Bahu (locally pronounced ‘Baava’) fort present an impressive sight from the Tawi Bridge, as one enters Jammu town from Pathankot side.
  3. Low Caste domestics.



birds of prey began to circle round them. To drown the pangs of hunger, the poor fellows were left with little option but to scratch the sand under their feet and drink water that oozed out of the porous soil. They thanked their stars that the place provided them water to slack their thirst or else they would have died of thirst. “It wasn’t a good omen that we set out on this expedition!” remarked one of them, rather sadly.

Presently, there was some noise in the bushes atop the hillock. One of the men shot off an arrow in the direction of the sound, thinking that he had outdone everyone else in making the first kill of the hunt. It could turn out to be a deer after all, he hoped, big enough to satisfy the appetite of all the men present there. He fell into a reverie. The beast would be thoroughly cleaned up. Then the royal chef would fry it nicely with all those spices he had brought from the palace. Oh what a nice treat it would make!

But when they went to the spot, they found that the archer had killed only a shehyena and that the head of the poor creature had fallen into a *kund* because of the arrow’s impact. The hunters were disappointed at the sight. And the man who was disappointed the most was the archer who had felled the hyena. He did not, out of spite, pull out the arrow from its head.

But little did the men know what was to become of the dead hyena! For as soon as the she-hyena had breathed its last, Lord Yama’s *doots*<sup>1</sup> had escorted her spirit to the netherland of *Yamapuri*<sup>2</sup>. There, they presented the disembodied soul before Dharam Raj for him to decide its fate. “What have been her good deeds and the evil ones?” The Lord of Death asked the celestial accountant, Chitrugupta. “*Maharaj*, ” the latter replied, “this creature was born a lowly beast, a carrion eater. What else could she do but indulge her beastly appetites! She does have one merit, though, that counts. For the spot where she died is a sanctified one. It is written in the Scriptures, “Whoever beholds this sacred pond, or bathes in it will attain salvation for endless generations!”

On hearing Chitrugupta’s account, Dharam Raj decreed that the hyena would take rebirth in the house of the Raja of Avantipur in Kashmir.

---

1. and 2 Messengers of Yama, the Lord of Death – Death does not come himself to fetch the soul of the mortals. When the time comes, He sends His dootas to escort the deceased’s soul to the netherworld, i.e. the *Yamapuri*.



In due course, she was reborn in Raja Veni Dutt's house. But right from the moment of her birth she was afflicted with a splitting headache. The Raja consulted soothsayers and other wise men to suggest a remedy. Some said she was under the malefic influence of the *Mangal*<sup>1</sup>. Others suggested that the Sun was ascendant in the wrong house at the time of her birth. The harried ruler then went to magicians who, told him that an enemy had cast an evil spell on the princess. Raja Veni Dutt did everything that was suggested to him, yet the little princess did not find relief from her tormenting headache.



---

1. The planet Mars



At last, the Raja consulted the astrologers of the school of the *Bhrigu Sanhita*<sup>1</sup>. Upon drawing the princess's horoscope they gave him their opinion. The princess in her previous birth, they said, was a hyena, killed at the holy Parmandal by a hunter under the mistaken belief that she was a deer. At the moment of her death her head had fallen in a pond sanctified by the presence of a *Linga*<sup>2</sup>. The astrologers went on to advise the Raja that he should himself go to the place and perform certain rites there. He was to retrieve the dead hyena's head from the pond and have the arrow pulled out from it. This done, he was to build a temple dedicated to *Mahadeva* and on a wall of the temple he was to cause a figure of she-hyena to be carved. Only then the princess would be completely cured, the astrologers said.

Raja Veni Dutt complied with the instructions of the astrologers in the letter and spirit. The moment they pulled out the rusted arrow from the hyena's skull at Parmandal, the princess lying in the palace at Avantipur was relieved of her headache.

Parmandal is located at a distance of some 12 *krohs*<sup>3</sup> from Jammu. It is connected by an ancient trail touching *Bain Bajalata*, *Tutein di Khui*, *Narain Khuh* and the *Bain* of the *Chargis*. One can also reach the place through *Bamanein di Bari*. In the recent times, a *pucca* road has been laid between Jammu and Parmandal.

On the fourteenth day of the month of Chaitra, Parmandal hosts a big fair. Three *krohs* from here lies the renowned place of pilgrimage called Uttar Behni. Maharaja Ranbir Singh had nursed a desire to build a whole lot of temples between Parmandal and *Uttar Behni* and make the place a second Kashi of India. He was able to fulfill his desire to a large extent. His successor, Maharaja Pratap Singh also paid attention to the development of this area as a place of religious significance. But the task could not be fully accomplished following his demise.

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1. An ancient treatise on astrology, reputed for its accurate reading of the three divisions of Time: the past, the present and the future
  2. Phallic representation of Lord Shiva
  3. A unit of distance (kos in Hindi); one kroh is equivalent to two miles or 3.2. kilometers



## *The Day it Rained Fishes*

**The** story goes that a man and his wife lived in village Nagrota, near Jammu. The man thought mighty of himself. One day, he taunted his wife, “People say women are very crafty, that they can outwit even the smartest of men. What’s your opinion?” The wife said there was not the least doubt about it. Once a man is caught in the web of a woman’s cunning, it is awfully difficult for him to extricate himself. The husband was not happy with his wife’s honest reply. “If that be the case,” he said, ‘then let’s see how cunning *you* can get!’” The wife tried her best to dissuade him from insisting on his challenge. But the thoughtless man was adamant.

Not long after this exchange, the husband was enjoying his afternoon siesta on a cosy day. The wife went to the bazaar and bought a basketful of a variety of fishes. On returning home, she spread the fishes in her courtyard and the rooftop. Having done this, she hurried to the bedroom and shook her dozing husband. “Hurry up! neighbours have already collected the choicest fish while you roll here on the bed,” she cried.

The husband was fond of fish. He got off his bed abruptly, “Who has brought fish? From where?” he asked. “No one has brought them from anywhere. It has rained fishes today! From the sky!” she said with a large grin on her face. “You’ve gone mad! How can it rain fishes?” exclaimed the husband.

The woman caught her husband by hand and dragged him out of their bedroom. Outside, the man witnessed a strange spectacle. There were fishes in his courtyard and fishes on his rooftop. Setting aside all his earlier misgivings, he took an empty basket lying near him and hastily filled it up with fishes. Entrusting the precious hoard to his wife’s custody, he went away to his work.

Returning home at dusk the man was hungry in anticipation of a tasty fish curry. Instead, his wife brought him dry *rotis* and common salt. “Why didn’t you send me something to cook today?” she pouted. The husband was



beside himself with rage. “But what happened to that basketful of fishes we had collected together? What else did you need to prepare us a decent curry?” “Oh my mother!” the wife exclaimed, “What has befallen you? Have you taken *bhang*<sup>1</sup> today? Who would have sent us a basketful of fishes?” “Why?” the husband yelled in blind rage, “Didn’t it rain fishes today?”



The wife laughed at first. Then covering her face with her *dupatta*, she began to wail aloud. Presently, neighbours started pouring in. Sobbing, she told them that her husband was behaving strangely. He was repeatedly

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1. Intoxicant extracted from hemp

demanding her to produce fishes that had rained at noon. “Fishes raining at noon!” The neighbours exclaimed in unison.

The husband, on the other hand, cried himself hoarse to tell everyone that he had indeed gathered fishes of a large variety with his own two hands and put them in the basket. But no one believed him. They thought the poor fellow had gone mad.

There was an elderly man among the neighbours who took the wife aside and asked her if her husband had suffered from a similar fit in the past. The wife nodded in affirmation and said, “Well, yes. On that occasion also he had kept muttering ‘where are the fishes that had rained today?’ or some such thing.”

“Can you recall, my daughter, what treatment was given to him that day?” persisted the kindly man.

“Not much of a treatment it was, *chachu*<sup>1</sup>. Someone had brought along the village barber who shaved my husband’s head with his *ustara*<sup>2</sup>...” “He just shaved his head? Are you sure?” “Now let me think... Perhaps, they had also rubbed salt on his skull afterwards.”

The helpful neighbours now had a job at their hands. They caught hold of the husband and tied him to a pillar. He was left there squirming helplessly and yelling at the top of his voice, while a man was sent to fetch the village barber.

This got the master of the household really worried. He beacons his wife to come near him and pleaded with her, “Gentle lady,” he implored with due humility, “I beg your pardon! You win, I lose, I acknowledge your cunning as a woman. But, pray, get me out of trouble!” His wife relented. She told the assembled people that it was an inauspicious day for curing her husband. His head could be shaved in the morning. Or, God willing, he might get well of his own accord! The neighbours went back to their homes. The wife then untied her husband and served him a delicious meal.

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1. A Dogri endearment for uncle (Hindi – Chacha)

2. An old fashioned razor



## *Not the One Eyed Groom*

**I**n the days gone by, parents relied on priests to fix marriages of their daughters. So it happened that a Raja requested his *Raj-purohit*<sup>1</sup> to go find a groom for his Princess. The priest thought that there could be no better groom for the Princess than his own son. That the lad was one-eyed added to his charm!

Hurriedly, the priest fixed the auspicious date for the nuptials and on the appointed day proceeded to bring the *baraat* at Raja's doorstep to wed the Princess with his deformed son.

On the way to the Raja's palace, the marriage party came across a poor lad wandering idly on the highway. Though bare feet and clad in rags, he was very handsome. The *Purohit* persuaded the fair youth to change into the groom's attire and ride the groom's horse. When the *baraat* reached the marriage venue, the wily Brahmin managed the affairs in such a manner that while his one-eyed son and the *baraatis* enjoyed the lavish hospitality extended by the Raja, the poor stranger had no option but to go through, an empty stomach, the various rituals and ceremonies required of a bridegroom.

At last, the fake bridegroom had the *lama-phere*<sup>2</sup> with the Princess. It was too late in the morning when he managed to meet the bride discreetly to tell her how she and her parents had been duped. "*Bhaliye Loki*<sup>3</sup>," he begged her, "whatever good or bad has happened between you and me cannot be undone. But right now I am starving. Please give me something to eat!" The Princess

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1. The royal priest – apart from officiating at the religious ceremonies of the royal household, he frequently acted as his sovereign's adviser and confidant.
  2. The seven circumambulations (the '*Sapta-padi*') which a Hindu man and a woman must take around the sacred fire to be married to each other. With the completion of the *lama-phere* ritual, marriage is considered irrevocable.
  3. A traditional endearment for wife. For husband, it is '*bhaliya loka*'. The expressions literally mean gentle lady/man

tore up her bridal dress to pieces and lit up a small fire. On this fire she parched some rice and offered it to the youth whom destiny had chosen as her husband. Realizing that the moment of parting with her spouse was drawing close, the Princess exchanged her gem-encrusted golden ring with his ordinary iron *chhalla* so that they may identify each other at some opportune moment in future.

The bride's parents, unaware of the trick that had been played on them, bid a tearful farewell to their daughter, greatly relieved that the marriage had gone off well. On the way back, when the marriage party had reached a jungle, the *Raj Purohit* forced the stranger to return to his rags and go away. Now it was his one-eyed son, astride the ceremonial mount, who proudly led the *baraat* and brought the Princess to his village.

When the Princess on reaching her in-laws' place saw through the *Raj Purohit's* stratagem, she was beside herself with rage. But she preferred to use tact rather than give vent to her anger at the moment. Alone in the bed-room with her one-eyed 'husband', she told him, "Please take me this very moment back to my parents' home. I have left behind a medicine which can cure your bad eye." The one-eyed man immediately made arrangements for her return journey, wisely choosing not to accompany her.

The Raja and Rani were worried on seeing their daughter's return so soon after the wedding. The Princess confronted her father, "*Bapu*", "she asked, "Did you give me one husband or two?"

"I gave you one husband, my child," replied the Raja.

"Is he normal, or is he one-eyed?"

"He's quite normal!"

Then the Princess told her father how they had been cheated. She assured him, though, that she was capable of finding her real husband if he agreed to have *dandiya* palace built for her in the jungle.

The rueful Raja not only built her a fine abode in the jungle but also sent along a number of maids to wait upon her.

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1. Endearment for father



When the Princess came to live in her new palace, she had a public announcement made all over the place to the effect that any man who told her a new tale would get a reward of a gold coin from her. Many were the people who came to her with their stories and went back with gold coins. One day the boy who had taken *lama phere* with her also approached her.

The Princess recognized him at the first sight. But she wanted to be sure, "So what's your story?" she asked him. "Do you want to hear a tale which happened to others or a tale which happened to me?" The man asked. The Princess told him to tell her his own story. The poor man then told her how on that very spot he was way laid by a marriage party and was forced to



pretend to be a groom. But when the marriage rites were over, he was left to spend the night on a hungry stomach. The following morning he had sneaked into the Princess's quarters and told her the truth. The Princess had given him parched rice to eat and exchanged rings with him. But when the *baraat* was on its way back homewards, the Brahmin had separated him from the bride and left him alone in the jungle.

“But where is the ring your bride had given you?” asked the Princess.

“Oh, I’ve left it with my mother!” he replied.

The Princess told him that if he could bring back the ring to her, she would give him not one but four gold coins.

The man went home and asked his mother to part with the ring. His mother told him that the woman who asked for his ring was no Princess but a fraud who was out to cheat him of the valuable jewel. She advised him not to go to her again.

But it was a matter of *sanjog*<sup>1</sup>, after all. The boy succeeded in winning over his mother with some effort. On securing the golden ring, he hastened to take it to the Princess. The Princess was now fully satisfied that she had met her real husband at last. Happily, she apprised her father of the glad tidings, who, overjoyed for his daughter's sake, made elaborate arrangements for their reunion. The Princess and her husband lived happily thereafter. The boy's mother also went on to live with the couple.

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1. Destiny – The Dogras evince strong faith in *sanjog* in matters of matrimony.



## *Union is Strength*

A he-sparrow and a she-sparrow lived happily and contented in their little home. One day, the king happened to pass by that side. The sparrows' house was as neat and tidy as a mirror. The king was impressed.

He summoned the he-sparrow and said to him, "Brother Sparrow, I am happy that you and your wife keep such a nice home. I would now like to know how well you cook. Prepare a good banquet when I come here next time!" Having said this, he went away, leaving the poor sparrows deeply worried. It was the king they had to host! They couldn't sleep the whole night.

At the daybreak, the husband and wife started their pitiful calculations all over again. a huge quantity of food material was required for the king's feast. And fire wood too, for the cooking. How were they to make all the arrangements? After a great deal of thought, the he-sparrow advised the she-sparrow, "Gentle lady! We're running out of time. Rather than waste precious time in idle brooding, it would be better if we started to do something about the job at hand. The she-sparrow agreed readily. Together, they flew into the open sky in search of grains and bits of tinder.

It took them a long time stocking all the ration and fuel. Then the she-sparrow sat down to the business of cooking. With great industry she ground wheat into flour and kneaded the dough, adding to it just the right quantities of salt and condiments. Setting up a pan over crackling fire, she began frying *babroos*<sup>1</sup>.

"Dear, would you taste a bit and let me know if it is nicely done?" The she-sparrow said to her mate, offering him a puffy, golden brown *babroo*. The he-sparrow had been feeling pangs of hunger for quite some time. Without minding how hot the *babroo* was, he bit into it with abandon. The steaming hot confection tasted delicious. Eating one *babroo* after the other, he realized

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1. A leavened sweet bread fried in purified butter

that he was being selfish. His wife too would be hungry. “They don’t taste bad, gentle lady,” he told her, “You may also eat a few of these things and let me fry them for you.”

The he-sparrow fried *babroos* and the she-sparrow ate them all. This way the couple took turns at frying *babroos* and eating them up, till they had consumed the entire dough.

It slowly dawned on them that they would no longer be able to entertain the king. The realization made them dumb with fear. The she-sparrow hid herself in her backyard. The he-sparrow also flew out of sight and sat on a distant treetop. At mid-day, the King arrived for the feast along with his followers. Standing before the sparrows’ house, he called out the he-sparrow. There was no response. He then entered the house and peeped into the kitchen. It was empty and so were all the pans and pots in it. Annoyed, the King ordered his servants to search out and apprehend the absconding couple. It did not take the King’s men long to spot the she-sparrow hiding in the backyard. On the King’s orders she was manacled and taken to the royal palace.

When the he-sparrow returned home, he found his worst fears had come true. The tyrant King had forcibly taken away his mate from him.

It was not an easy task to liberate his beloved from the royal prison. The he-sparrow raked his brains for a way out. At last he hit upon a plan. Calling together his friends, the biting ants, he yoked them to a winnower, and on this make-shift cart he set upon his expedition to the palace. On his way, the he-sparrow came across some drones. “Uncle Sparrow,” the drones asked him, “where are you going?” The he-sparrow replied:

*“I’ve turned my winnower into a cart  
And asked biting ants to pull it –  
The king has taken away my mate  
Are you going to join my fight?”*

The drones said, “Of course, Uncle Sparrow, there is strength in unity! Take us along. I’ll prove useful to you.”

“Come,” enter into my right ear!” said the he-sparrow, and the drones went into his ear.



As he proceeded further, the he-sparrow met wasps. They too queried him about his purpose and offered to accompany him. "We will be of use when the time comes," the wasps assured the he-sparrow. "Come, then, get into my left ear," he said, and the wasps and buzzards noisily flew into his left ear.

The he-sparrow was advancing with his small army, when he reached a spring. He decided to rest there awhile. Drawing near the spring to quench his thirst, he heard a voice, "Uncle Sparrow, where are you going?"

The he-sparrow responded:

*"I've turned my winnower into a cart  
And asked biting ants to pull it –  
The king has taken away my mate  
Are you going to join my fight?"*

A voice again rose from the spring to respond, "One and one makes eleven. I too will follow you, Uncle Sparrow, if you agree." The he-sparrow said, "You are most welcome, dear. Enter into my belly." Hardly had he uttered the words than the spring water went gurgling into his stomach.

At last, the he sparrow stopped before the king's palace. Here he yelled, "Oh King, will you return my she-sparrow, or not."

The King shouted back, "No, never, come what may?"

The he-sparrow recited:

*"A winnower afore and a broom behind,  
Come out, dear ones! 'tis your turn!"*

The drones came out of the he-sparrow ear and spread all over the palace. The King ordered his ministers and high officials, "Let's have plenty of smoke. That will drive away all the drones!"

And sure enough, the drones vanished at the first gust of smoke.

The he-sparrow recited a second time,

*"A winnower afore and a broom behind,  
Come out, buzzards, 'tis your turn, now!"*

A great din arose when the buzzards and wasps attacked the royal palace. The King told his men, "Don't panic sprinkle some kerosene and set it on fire. Not one foe shall escape." And it so happened. As the flames flared up, some of the insects were roasted alive and the others made good escape.

The he-sparrow, however, was not the one to accept an easy defeat. He called forth his next ally, the water. It came out gushing with great force from his belly, drenching everything that came its way. Even the fire got extinguished. And the water kept rising. The he-sparrow asked the arrogant King once again:

*"Water has risen to your ankles,  
O! King, will you release my mate, now?"*

"No! I told you so!" The King replied again.

The water surged forth with yet greater force and rose to knee-level. The he-sparrow repeated his question earnestly.





*“Water has risen to your knees,  
O! King, will you release my mate, now?”*

The King was adamant in his refusal. The water on its part kept rising. It reached his waist. The King remained unmoved. As the water rose higher, the king could neither get rid of his false pride, nor think of a way to stop its upwards surge.

When the water level had risen to the king’s throat, the he-sparrow asked him once again:

*“Water has risen to your throat,  
O! King, will you release my mate, now?”*

The obdurate King even at the moment could not bring himself to concede defeat at the hands of the he-sparrow and his companions. At last, the surging water carried the tyrant away. As the palace went into a turmoil, the he-sparrow went ahead and freed the she-sparrow from the dungeon. The couple climbed into their cart and rode together to their home to live happily thereafter.

## *Bharua, the Miser*

**Once** upon a time there lived in a village a miser who it seemed had vowed never to refund any loan he took from anyone. The villagers had named him ‘Bharua<sup>1</sup>’.

It was the fair of the *Kumbha*. All the villagers set out to take the holy dip in the Ganga on that auspicious occasion. When Bharua was asked to go along, he replied, “Look, you people are going to travel in some style, spending huge sums on fare and things. But a poor chap like me would have to slog the whole distance. Better then it is that you go your way and me mine. God willing, I will also reach there when I can!” The villagers went ahead on their pilgrimage, leaving him to his own designs.

When they had gone, Bharua told his wife “Good woman, stitch me a bag, for I too am going to the fair.” The woman stitched him a bag. Bharua flung the bag on his shoulder and embarked on the journey. He would beg food in one village that fell on his way and proceed to sell the surplus stuff in the next. In this manner, he financed his trip to Haridwar.

On reaching the banks of the Ganga, he removed his clothes and was about to plunge into the holy river, when he was approached by the attendant sweeper, “Brother,” he said, “you cannot take a dip in the Ganga unless you pay me my dues!”

“What dues?” countered Bharua. “Don’t tell me you own the Holy Ganga! She is mother to us all. I have come from afar to seek her blessing. It’s not good on your part to stand in my way. Please let me take a dip!”

“No, sir!” said the sweeper, “You can do so only after you have paid me my dues. If you cannot, then go home. Everyone who takes a bath here is required first to pay.”

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1. Literally, a fool



“Please don’t get annoyed with me, brother,” said Bharua in an attempt to placate him, “I will go away from here, if that’s what you want.”



He picked up his clothes and walked on the river bank till he had reached a lonely spot. “It will be all right if I take a bath now,” he said to himself. “There is no one here to pester me for money.”

Happily, Bharua descended into the river. He had hardly reached knee-deep water when someone yelled at him from behind, “O brother, didn’t I tell you to pay me first and then bathe in this river? You haven’t cared to heed me. Now get out of the river this moment, or else...”

Bharua felt harassed that the pest of a sweeper had followed him even to this desolate place. Little did he know that this tormentor of his was no



ordinary sweeper but Lord Krishna Himself in disguise! The Lord had wanted to see for himself how far this man could persist in his whims not to pay back what he owed to anyone.

But Bharua too was a chronic miser! “Brother,” he told the sweeper, “If you have decided to fleece me, than I invite you to my village. Come there on any festival day and I’ll give you what you ask. But for God’s sake, let me take a peaceful bath. I beseech you!”

Lord Krishna in disguise relented at last and said, “Well, then, have a nice bath! But don’t ever forget that you are under my debt.”

Having said this, He disappeared from the scene. Bharua had a hearty bath and in due course he returned to his village, begging his passage all the way.

On reaching home, he told his neighbours, “Look, a sweeper may come to our village one of these days, asking for me. I beseech you to make him sit awhile in a shop and inform me of his arrival on the sly. That man comes here to take money from me and I’d need a fair warning of his visitation.” The amused villagers assured him that they would see to it that no one perturbed him unduly.

The festival day arrived. And dot on the day came the sweeper. The village urchins came running to Bharua’s home and told him, “Bharua, there’s a sweeper in the village and he is asking for you!”

Bharua pleaded with them to hold his creditor at the village shop till he was ready to face him. Then he told his wife, “Gentle lady, hurry up! Draw a *mandli*<sup>1</sup> on the floor, for my creditor, the sweeper, has come! When I lie down on it, please cover my body with a shroud. Tell him, ‘*Maharaj*, your debtor is dead. There’s no one to pay you now!’ The man will go away on hearing you.”

At last, Lord Krishna in his sweeper’s garb arrived at Bharua’s doorstep. “Brother Bharua, are you there? I’ve come to collect my debt.” He called out. Bharua’s wife responded from inside the house. “Your debtor has died,” she said, sobbing noisily, “Who’s going to repay you?”

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1. A design of religious significance prepared on the ground for a dying person to lie down and breathe his last



But it is not for a mere mortal to cheat Lord Krishna, who is all-knowing. He shouted back, “It is so sad that my debtor has died. I have traveled a long distance to meet him. Now let me at least offer wood<sup>1</sup> on his pyre.” The wife became anxious for Bharua’s safety. She rushed back to the spot where he was lying covered in his shroud and whispered in his ears, “Get up, dear! Your creditor says he’ll put an end to the whole affair by burning you on the pyre!”

“Don’t you worry, woman. Just tell him there’s no one around to cremate me. We’ve not been on speaking terms with the entire clan. Tell him to please go away and leave you to your fate,” Bharua advised his wife.

The wife spoke to Lord Krishna as tutored by her husband. Upon which the Lord said, “So what if your kindred are annoyed! Come, let’s do the job together. I’ll lift his head and you take his feet. The two of us can carry him easily to the burning *ghat*. How long you will be vexing yourself all alone!”

The wife went back to Bharua and said, “He’s not going to leave us alone without being paid. Please give him something and get rid to him. “Tell him we don’t have any fire wood for the cremation.” Bharua said.

The wife told Lord Krishna accordingly. “Have no anxiety on this account,” He responded. “Give me an axe and I’ll get you enough fuel by smashing this dwelling of yours!”

When she heard of the stranger’s resolve to smash her dwelling, the door woman cried out, “O Bharua, are you listening? He’s ready to destroy our home. Pay him now, I beseech you!”

But Bharua did not budge. Money was his life. He would not part with it willingly. “Don’t bother yourself, Gentle lady,” said he, “we’ll live in the open. But I’m not going to pay him anything.

Lord Krishna had gone ahead to dismantle Bharua’s house and with the help of the man’s wife erected a funeral pyre. Bharua had also managed in the meanwhile to counsel his wife, “It seems we will have to use some more cunning with him. The sun is about to set, you see. Hug me tightly and keep crying your heart out till the sunset. At that time, tell him it is too late to cremate your departed husband. Take the wretch home on the ruse that you

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1. Offering pieces of wood on someone’s funeral pyre is considered a mark of respect for the deceased



will cook him some supper. When the two of you leave this place, I too will get up from the pyre and escape to safety.”

Bharua’s wife and Lord Krishna lifted Bharua with care and placed him on the pyre. The woman hugged her husband and started crying piteously. She warded off the Lord’s attempts to light the pyre, insisting that she won’t allow the body to be cremated so soon. Sitting close to the unlit pyre, Lord Krishna watched the antics of the woman. The sun was approaching the western horizon. Lord Krishna got up and told the woman, “Please stand aside and let me do what has to be done. The sun is about to set. It’s a matter of few moments now. Once the sun is set, there will be no cremation.<sup>1</sup>” The wife, however, didn’t move an inch and kept on weeping.

When the sun had gone down at last, she spoke, “The day is over now. It’s no use waiting here. You must be hungry. Let’s go home. I’ll cook you a meal...”

Knowing well what was going in her mind, Lord Krishna replied, “If you are so anxious about my hunger, please send me one or two *rotis* here itself. I cannot go with you, as someone has to guard your husband’s body lest it should be devoured by dogs and jackals.”

Lord Krishna watched the wife go to her home. When she was out of sight, he got up and walked stealthily to a *dehri*<sup>2</sup> to keep a watch on Bharua. Bharua also sensed that there was no one standing beside the pyre. He cast away his shroud and walked to the same *dehri* where the Lord was in the hiding.

Under the dark, moonless sky, a funereal silence prevailed in the wilderness. Then the night’s hush was broken by arrival of four armed men. They were dacoits out on a looting spree. One by one they took their vows before the *dehri*. The first said, “If I loot the house of a certain moneylender, I’ll make an offer of twenty *sers*<sup>3</sup> of *mishri*<sup>4</sup> before you!” The second said,

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1. The Dogras do not cremate their dead after the sunset.

2. A small brick structure erected in the memory of someone dead

3. ‘Seer’ in English, an obsolete unit of weight, roughly equivalent to 2lb or 0.9 kilogram

4. Crystalline sugar, much valued in olden days



“And I’ll offer twenty *sers* of dried dates.” The third said, “My offer will be a length of the finest velvet.” It was the turn of the fourth dacoit. He avowed that he would strike the *dehri* on its head with a stone used for grinding salt. After making their vows, the dacoits went their way.

Bharua was happy at the thought of having things like mishri, dates and velvet cloth but when he remembered the vow of the fourth dacoit, his heart missed a beat.

The dacoits returned in a short while with their loot. Bharua watched them alertly. They had four camels laden with fabrics and other materials. The first dacoit made an offer of twenty *sers mishri*. Instantly, Bharua dragged the platter to himself. The dacoit told his second companion that there was some spirit present inside the shrine, which readily accepted the offerings. The second dacoit went inside and offered twenty *sers* of dried dates. This too was snatched away promptly by Bharua. The third dacoit came with his offer of a length of velvet. He too was terrified on seeing the cloth being snatched by some force in the darkness. When it was the turn of the fourth dacoit who was carrying the grinding stone, Bharua cried out, “Alas, I’ve no brother here who could save my head from the impending onslaught!” Lord Krishna, who was standing nearby responded, “Don’t you worry, Brother!” I’m with you!”

When the dacoits heard the exchange between the two, they ran away in fear, thinking that the place was haunted by several ghosts. In their terror they left behind their camels. Lord Krishna approached Bharua and said, “My friend! Why don’t you pay up now?”

“Look,” said Bharua, “we have with us three camels laden with the loot. Isn’t it enough? Let’s share the booty. Stop pestering me with your demand for money!” Bharua then embarked on distribution: “This camel is mine, and that’s yours. I won’t mind if you insist on having that *thaan*<sup>1</sup> of fancy piece, even though all the velvet comes to my share...”

The dacoits who had not gone afar heard the whispering of Bharua. This set them thinking. What was going on there? Was the *dehri* really haunted? They decided to see for themselves.

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1. A tightly rolled length of cloth

At the *dehri* when Bharua had divided the booty, Lord Krishna told him again, “Bharua, you’ve turned a rich man. Please give me my due.” Bharua was at his wits end. He still did not know how to pay him.

Meanwhile, one of the dacoits, who was the most courageous of them all told his companions to wait for him while he went ahead to peep into the *dehri* to find out what lay there.

With a *lungi*<sup>1</sup> of finest silk tied around his head, the dacoit walked stealthily towards the shrine. On reaching there, he proceeded to peep into the shrine. It was as if Bharua had been waiting for the moment. He extended his hand and plucked away the piece of cloth from the dacoit’s head. The dacoit, losing all his courage, cried out, “My *lungi* has gone! Run! Run away for dear life!”

Bharua threw the *lungi* he had snatched away from the dacoit in the lap of Lord Krishna and said decisively, “Here, take this as your due! I owe you nothing now.”

Thus, Bharua the Miser parted with the dacoit’s *lungi*, but he didn’t pay one paise to Lord Krishna. Taking his share of the booty, he lived happily thereafter.

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1. A piece of colourful cloth tied around the waist; used as a casual wear by men.



## *The Magic of the Soil*

**V**erily, destiny is a mighty force! It can turn the wise into simpering fools and mighty kings into beggars. Destiny it was that made the Pandavas to indulge in gambling and lose not only their kingdom but also suffer the misery of twelve long years in exile.

The five Pandavas had to wander from place to place along with their mother, Kunti. One day they were in this jungle and the next they found themselves in some other backwoods. They had the wild beasts and the spite of Duryodhana to content with. Theirs was hard life indeed.



Adversity might have toughened the Pandavas. But they were princes after all, brought up in the lap of luxury. Kunti too had spent the better part of her life in splendour. The exile meant that during their endless wanderings in the wilderness they had neither an adequate supply of food, nor proper beds on which to sleep. Hardship was gradually eroding their spirits.

Rambling thus in a pitiful manner through the Chamba region, Kunti and her five sons camped near a village called Kalaar, in the vale of Pangi. One day, during their residence there, Kunti was lying on the ground at night. Two of the Pandavas were massaging her feet and the rest were sharing their day's experiences with her. "Mother," one of them asked casually, "would you like to remarry?"

"Yes, of course, my son!" Kunti replied spontaneously. "You have divined my heart's desire! I wonder if it were possible!" Yudhishter, who sat at some distance, was shocked on hearing his mother's wish. Crestfallen, he walked out of the place. The very next morning he decided to shift the camp from Kalaar. Calling Bhim aside, he asked him to take along some soil from the place.

They had not spent much time at the site of the new camp, when Kunti was asked the same question. "Mother, do you want to marry again?" The moment she heard it, Kunti felt as if someone had branded her body with a red hot iron. Her eyes turned red with rage, and she shouted at her offending son, "O sinful one! Why are you plunging me into evil? Why was not your tongue burnt to cinders before you could utter such an obscenity?"

After spending some days there, the Pandavas shifted their camp yet again to another place. One fine morning, Yudhishter slyly spread the soil he had brought from Kalaar village around his mother. Kunti started to twist and turn in her bed like a maniac. "My sons!," she said aloud, "I have had enough of this harsh life. I ask you to arrange my remarriage with someone!"

Next day, they again changed the camp site. One among the Pandavas touched upon the matter of Kunti's marriage again, and she cried out in anguish,



“O you, *lakkro*<sup>1</sup>, why are you bent upon burning me alive? A woman had better be barren rather than conceive such ingrate offspring!” Crying copiously, she lost consciousness.

Arjun was upset at their mother’s strange behaviour. Yudhishter relieved him by taking out some soil from under Kunti’s bed. “Don’t you worry, Arjun. It’s nothing but the magic of the soil of Kalaar.”

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1. Literally, a log of wood, used as a term of abuse

## *A Fragrant Flower*

**Once** upon a time, there lived a King. Seven queens the king had, but not a single child. The junior-most of the queens was a woman of great charm and loving disposition. Of all this queens, the king loved her the most. And she in turn was despised by her six co-wives. But despite their rancour, the six queens could do no harm to the favoured queen. In time, their hatred united them in thought and action, and to have her thrown out of the palace became their chief objective.

The King smouldered in a worry of his own: in the absence of an heir, who would look after his expansive realm when he was gone? Much time passed in this fashion. The King observed numerous austerities, had auspicious texts recited, appeased saints and holy men. At last, God heard his plaint and the junior queen was with child. The King was jubilant.

The royal hoards were thrown open. The poor and the indigent could take away whatever they wished. There was to be no holding back. Everybody was in a celebratory mood. Everybody, but the senior queens! Burning in the secret fire of jealousy, they redoubled their efforts to humiliate the junior queen.

The King ordained that a drum should be placed close to the expectant queen so that the birth of the infant could be instantly announced by the drumbeat. The senior queens managed to have the drum beaten two or three times in false alarm. The King came running at every drumbeat and had to return disappointed. The last time it happened, he told the junior queen, out of dismay, that if there was yet another drumbeat, he would not come to her even if the drumhead were torn with beating.

In due course, a prince and a princess were born to the junior queen. But before the king could get a wind of the birth of the twins, the abettors of the envious senior queen put the new-born in *chatis*<sup>1</sup> and buried them under a

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1. An earthen vessel



distant dunghill. Having done the ghastly deed, they returned to the queen with a pair of dead rats, which they placed near her silently.

The King, having got the news that something had gone amiss with his beloved queen, rushed to her quarters. The sight of the dead rats lying beside her sent him to a blind fury. Adding fuel to the fire, the senior queens said, "Maharaj, the truth lies bare before us. Your beloved queen has given birth to rats. It's God's mercy that they both are dead. But now Your Majesty will have to take strictest measures lest this word should go out of the palace! That will be the undoing of us all!"



The arrow had found its target. The King ordered that the junior queen be instantly banished from the palace. But the senior queens were devious. To



ward off any suspicion that they carried ill-will towards their co-wife, they beseeched the king with folded hands, “Maharaj, we beg your mercy! Our poor sister, the junior queen is like a sister to us. Let her be in the palace itself. We will put her on the duty of scaring away crows.”

The king agreed readily to their request. The junior queen ceased to be his most adored queen, and became a lowly minion instead! Her finery and jewels were taken away and she was given castaway clothes to wear.

Time passed, as it always does. From the dunghill under which the prince and princess were buried sprang two elegant plants. One was a mango tree and the other a *chameli* flowering bush. The two plants grew up tall and sturdy. When the flowering season came, the mango tree bore such excellent fruit as had never been seen on any other mango tree. The fragrance of the *chameli*<sup>1</sup> too spread far and wide.

One day, the King was taking a stroll in his garden. At some distance from him, the junior queen was performing her chore of scaring crows. It came to be that a crow circled over the King’s head and dropping a *chameli* flower on his turban, flew away. The King took the flower in his hand. Its delicate beauty and sweet smell enamoured him. Immediately, he summoned his vizier and asked him to send his men in search of the plant that had borne the exquisite flower.

In short time, the King’s sepoy’s came upon the spot. They saw a *Chameli* bush redolent with white flowers. Beside it stood a young mango tree. The moment the king’s men approached the bush, a feminine voice arose from its roots, “*Beeran bhapa*<sup>2</sup>,” it said, “our father’s sepoy’s have descended on me to pluck my flowers. Shall I bow lower by two lengths of hand or shall I rise higher by two lengths of hand?”

A reply emanated from the roots of the mango tree, “*Bhen*<sup>3</sup> Champa, rise you higher by two lengths of hand!” The sepoy’s were alarmed. They rushed back to the vizier and told him of the wondrous speaking trees. The vizier listened carefully to the men and said, “Go, get my horse ready! Also arrange a tall ladder for me. I will go there myself and bring those flowers.”

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1. A white flower popular for its sweet smell
  2. A sister’s endearment for her older brother
  3. Sister



The vizier approached the *chameli* bush with his ladder. The feminine voice came again from the roots of the plant, “*Beeran bhapa! Beeran bhapa!* Look at him. The old vizier himself has come to take my flowers. Shall I bow lower by two lengths of hand or shall I rise higher by two lengths of hand?”

Pat came the reply from the roots of the mango tree, “*Champa Bhen*, rise you higher by one hundred lengths of hand!” Try hard as he might, the vizier could not touch the flowers.

Dejected, he went back to the king’s palace and told him everything. The King was stunned. Accompanied by his queens, he went to the *chameli* bush. But as soon as he extended his hands to pluck its flowers, the mango tree advised the *chameli* bush to rise still higher. As a consequence, the king could not reach the flowers.

At last someone advised that the junior queen should be asked to make a try, since she was the only one who had not approached the *chameli* bush. The king ordered the junior queen to pluck the desired flowers. On her approach, the *chameli* bush again asked the mango tree, “*Beeran bhapa! Beeran bhapa!* Mother has herself come to me now. Please tell me quickly what should I do!” The mango tree replied, “Go, drop in Mother’s lap!”

And then what happened, had to happen. The branches of the *chameli* bush clung to the junior queen. The mango tree too embraced her and piteously told her his tale of woe. Both the *chameli* bush and the mango tree entreated the junior queen to take them out of the dunghill.

The King who stood close by, was listening intently. Tears swelled in his eyes out of remorse. He ordered his men to pull out the prince and princess from the dump. The order was carried out immediately. Both the siblings came out shining brightly and hug their parents.

The King tendered an apology to his junior queen. The queen replied with a smile, “You are not at fault, my lord! It’s my destiny!” The King, to the dismay of the senior queens, restored her to her former glory.

Almighty God, may everyone regain, as the junior queen did, their lost happiness!

## *Darling Sister of Seven Brothers*

**S**he was the darling sister to seven brothers, and she wanted to go to the village fair. But there was a problem. All her friends boasted of bright red *dupattas*<sup>1</sup>, set off with shining *kinari*<sup>2</sup> work. She had none.

The girl asked her sister-in-law who was sweeping the floor, “Dear *bhabhi*, will you lend me your red *dupatta*? I want to go to the fair.”

The reluctant sister-in-law made an excuse, “You can see how busy I am. Why don’t you go to the other sister-in-law and ask her?”

The girl went to the second sister-in-law and repeated her request, “Dear *bhabhi*, will you lend me your red *dupatta*? I want to go to the fair.” Her second *bhabhi* said, “I’m kneading the dough. Go and ask the other sister-in-law.”

The poor girl approached each one of her sisters-in-law but was refused, till she went to the oldest one. “Dear *bhabhi*,” she pleaded with her. “will you please lend me your red *dupatta*? I want to go to the fair.” The sister-in-law got up and rummaged through her wicker baskets. At last she found her wedding *dupatta*. “Have this, if you will,” she cautioned her. “But if you bring a single blot on it, it will cost you your life. Mind my words!”

The sister of seven brothers was somewhat subdued by the her kin’s dire threat, but she accepted the *dupatta* nonetheless. Once she was in the company of the girls her age, she was carefree as ever. The fair ground was a thrilling kaleidoscope of sights and sounds. At one spot, people of all ages pushed each other for a ride on the merry-go-round. At another, the village belles haggled with a bangle-seller for the brightest bangles. Toy sellers were offering attractive wares at irresistible bargains.

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1. Head-cloth used by women-folk in North India

2. Gold-threaded strip stitched to the borders of a garment to give it a rich look



Women adorned in their best finery were sampling sweets at the confectioner's shop. The sister of seven brothers too fell to enjoying delicacies at the sweet shop.

As ill luck would have it, a vulture came flying from somewhere and left a dropping on her borrowed *dupatta*. The girl now recalled to her dismay how her *bhabhi* had threatened to kill her if her head-cloth got soiled. She tried at once to wash off the stain with water, but rather than going away, the tiny blot spread to an ugly smudge on the cloth.

Returning home, the girl was too afraid to tell her *bhabhi* about the little accident which had spoiled her treasured *dupatta*. Instead, she folded it carefully so as to hide its soiled portion, and returned it to her eldest brother's wife without a word.

But the innocent girl had not reckoned with her *bhabhi's* true nature. The woman had long envied her for the affection her husband and other men of the household showered on her. It was now a ready excuse for her to get rid of the darling of her brothers.

Thus the woman fumed and fretted on seeing the blot on her cherished *dupatta*. When it was the time for her husband to return home, she went into an unlit *kothri*<sup>1</sup> and lay there on a *jhikki manji*<sup>2</sup>. Presently, her husband entered the room and enquired, "What has upset you so much that you lie on this *jhikki manji*?"

The wife replied, "I'm upset because of that darling sister of yours. She has brought a blot on the family's name!"

The man got flustered. "What has my little sister done?" he asked.

"She begged me to give her a red *dupatta* for going to the village fair. You know how open-hearted I am, unlike those niggardly wives of your brothers. I gave her my own wedding *dupatta*! But the girl on her return from the fair handed me over my cherished *dupatta*, all soiled and blotched up. I'm going to kill myself here and now. It is better to die than live in shame!"

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1. A dingy room

2. A sagging string cot. Traditionally, when a house wife wanted to show her annoyance with her husband, she went to her dark *kothri* and lay on a *jhikki manji*.



The husband too lost his composure. His sister must have done something terribly wrong, he thought, to have driven his wife to such fury.

“Don’t you talk of dying, Gentle lady,” he pleaded with his wife, “tell me how can I recompense you for my sister’s wicked deed?”

“Kill her!”

“I can’t do that.”

“You will not only kill her, but also wash my wedding *dupatta* with her blood. Or else, I will die thinking my husband did not love me.” The woman nagged her husband till he had agreed to do her bidding.



The day broke at last and the brother said to his sister, “Come, lass, let me take you to our *nani*’s<sup>1</sup> place.”

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1. Maternal grandmother



The clueless girl was overjoyed at the prospect of meeting her maternal grand mother. It was a long journey through wilderness. At the dusk, when it was getting dark, the siblings reached a water tank. “It is a nice place, sister. Let’s tarry a while here and drink some water,” proposed the brother. She agreed readily.

First, it was the brother who drank water from the tank. When he had taken his fill, the girl bent down to the water body with her cupped palms to quench her thirst. The brother was waiting for this moment. Taking out the sharp sickle he had concealed in his clothes, he served her head with a mighty blow. Blood gushed forth from the girl’s body like water from a spring. The man washed his wife’s headwear in his sister’s blood and buried the corpse in a shallow ditch. Having done the bidding of his spouse, he returned home at night and fell asleep.

In a due course of time, a mango tree grew out of the spot where the girl had been killed. Cute little *sandoori*<sup>1</sup> mangoes sprang from the tree. The king’s washerman used to come to the tank daily to wash clothes. On seeing the mango tree, he approached it to pluck the delicious fruit. Hardly had he touched a mango when teardrops started falling from the leaves. A voice cried out from the tree:

*“Don’t you pluck its fruit, O dhobi,  
Don’t you touch this tree,  
A brother’s done his wife’s bidding  
And with a sickle killed his kin!”*

The washerman was frightened out of his wits on hearing the disembodied voice. Leaving the king’s dirty linen behind, he ran away as fast as his legs could take him.

Next day, the King heard of the incident. Skeptical of the *dhobi*’s version, he decided to inspect the strange mango tree.

As the King approached the tree, copious tears began to run down its leaves. The king had never before seen a weeping tree. He stretched out his hand to pluck a fruit. A sad voice filled the environs:

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1. Sandoori mangoes have a greenish vermillion tinge and are delectable

*“Don’t you pluck its fruit, O king,  
Don’t you touch this tree,  
A brother’s done his wife’s bidding  
And with a sickle killed his kin!”*

The wise king fathomed that the spot had been witness to a gory deed.

The place was dug out on the King’s orders, only to reveal the girl’s remains. A gold ring lay near the skeleton. The king called the city’s goldsmith to identify the ring’s owner. Thus the truth came out. The King summoned the seven brothers and asked each of them, in turn, the whereabouts of their sister. The youngest of brothers told the King that it was his oldest sibling who had taken her to their *nani*’s place. Before long, the guilty brother had confessed his heinous crime.

The King exiled the man and his wife at that very moment.



## *Mahadevi*

**Long** long time ago, there lived an old man at a place somewhere between Kaluchak and Kajurangi tank near Jammu. His name was Teku. Teku was the sole master of thousands of acres of fertile land. God had bestowed on him all His blessings, but one. With a complexion as dark as the back side of *tawa*<sup>1</sup>, thick lips and a pockmarked face, he did not exactly cut a handsome figure.

But where wealth is, looks matter little! When a word arrived, Krishnu Pant, a Brahmin of modest means from Akhnoor, readily offered to old Teku the hand of his young and beautiful daughter, Mahadevi. Like any other father, Krishnu Pant nursed a desire that his daughter would roll in riches in her in-laws home.

Days went by. Then, on the auspicious day fixed by astrologers, Teku arrived at the bride's place, astride a resplendent horse and his face covered by a glittering *sehra*<sup>2</sup>. A huge *baraat*<sup>3</sup> followed him. The bride's folk had gone out of their way to make the wedding a superb affair. The kin of the bride's and groom's side had a joyous *milni*<sup>4</sup>, and a lavish feast awaited the *baratis*.

The following morning, the bride's sisters and girls from the neighbourhood brought large platters of *ghyur*<sup>5</sup> for the groom's breakfast. Teku had uncovered his face from the veil of *sehra* at this time of the day. Clad in his garish finery, he looked uglier than his usual self. The young women,

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1. Iron disc used for baking rotis
  2. Ornamental veil tied round a bride-groom's head
  3. Bride-groom's party
  4. Ceremonial introduction between each other of the close kin of the bride and groom, when the *baraat* arrives at the bride's residence. There is much hugging and *bon homie* on the occasion
  5. a delicacy made of fine flour fried in ghee, especially made on marriage occasions

who were twittering in gaitly like so many sparrows, suddenly fell silent. Their face wore expression of disapproval. Then one girl whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, "Is he the bride-groom or a *daitya*<sup>1</sup> come to frighten us! Another girl remarked, "No, he is a *grehn*<sup>2</sup> out to tarnish our friend Mahadevi's beauty! A third exclaimed, "I wonder why Krishnu Pant did not lick *mohra*<sup>3</sup> before settling for such an odious match for his daughter!" The fourth remonstrated that if her parents had chosen the man for her, she would have jumped straight into a well.



As many tongues wagged as there were mouths. But all this while, Teku kept mum, digesting every humiliation that was heaped on him. He did not react even when the girls, lost in the flurry his sight had caused in their minds, took away the breakfast platter they had brought for him. Like a deadly serpent, he saved his venom for the right occasion.

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1. Demon
  2. Eclipse
  3. A poisonous herb



The fateful moment for Teku and Mahadevi to take the *pheres*<sup>1</sup> round the sacred fire. On completion of the third *phera*, Teku said his eyes were stung by the smoke rising from the *haven kund*<sup>2</sup> and that he wanted to go outside for fresh air for a while. Untying the ceremonial knot with his bride, he came out of the *bedi*<sup>3</sup>, saddled his horse and galloped homewards without telling anyone in the bride's family.

On reaching his estate in Jallo Chack, it did not take him long to marry the daughter of a Brahmin client of his. Teku had not forgotten the insults that he had suffered at residence of Mahadevi's father. Out of spite, he now wore the same *sehra* that he had worn in Akhnoor, where those silly girls had called him a demon on his face.

Back at Krishnu Pant's residence, the village people had started looking for the missing groom the moment he had disappeared from the spot. But a man could be found at a place if only he was there!

Matters such as these do not remain hidden for long. At last, the villagers came to know that Teku had taken offense at the girl's taunts and gone ahead to marry another girl out of sheer spite.

Hardly two years had passed after the incident when Teku had a fight with his rivals over the boundary of his farms. Teku plunged a knife in his rival's belly and the rival's brother smashed his head with a mattock. The rival died on the spot. Teku however, breathed his last on reaching home.

The tidings of Teku's demise reached his half-married bride in Akhnoor. She told her parents calmly, "He has expired. We couldn't meet in life. But now I'm determined to join him in death."

Both the parents tried their best to argue with her that she had no relationship with the man. But the lass left her home all alone, turning a deaf ear to all their pleadings.

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1. The seven circumambulations which the Hindu groom and bride take around the sacred fire to be married
  2. The special receptacle/structure in which the sacred fire is lit to make offerings during religious rituals
  3. A temporary structure for carrying out special rituals such as marriage

Meanwhile, Teku's wedded wife, Radha who was in the family way, had taken in her head to become *sati*. She had distributed all her belongings amongst the poor. Taking a bath, she clad herself in a single piece of long cloth and advanced towards the pyre. Radha had barely taken a step ahead when she heard a voice from a distance. '*Khabardar!* I warn you, don't you place your foot on the funeral pyre!'

Everyone looked in the direction of the voice. They saw a regnant figure standing atop a hillock, admonishing them with her raised arm, "Listen, listen to me, brothers and sisters. So what if the deceased had left me half married! Full marriage or half marriage is just a matter of thinking. Half married I may be, but he remains my husband. I'm going to immolate myself with his body." Then pointing towards Radha, she continued, "She's pregnant. You all are righteous people. You abide by the faith. I entreat you to take good care of my sister and her yet-to-be born child."

Having spoken thus, she fell down with a thud and died instantly.

The mourners lifted her body. They bathed it. Placing her along-side Teku, they ignited the pyre. Everyone said 'Hail Mahadevi'

In due course, a son was born to Radha. Teku's clan flourished. The Brahmins of that clan then had a *dehri* built to Mahadevi. This dehri exists even to this day in the fields on the banks of Balol. One can see it on way to Kaluchak.



## *Doing Justice to an Oilman*

*It* was a time when there were no courts of justice and no elaborate procedure of law to follow. A man with a grievance had to approach the Maharaja himself. All that the petitioner had to do was offer a rupee coin to the ruler in his court, narrate his woe and seek justice. The Maharaja then considered the suit himself and went on to pronounce a judgment on the spot.

There lived an oilman who deposited his hard earned savings coin by coin with the local moneylender. The poor man had nursed a secret desire to go on a pilgrimage when he had amassed enough money. A few years passed and he heard of the *kumbh*<sup>1</sup> fair being held at Haridwar. It was a big occasion.

The oilman got ready to go to the fair. By his reckoning he had deposited one hundred rupees worth of coins with the moneylender. But when he went to the moneylender to get back his money, the other asked him blandly, “Tell me, when you gave me any money for safe keeping? Give me one proof, and I will handover to you all that you claim!”

Knowing that he held nothing of the sort, he went to the Maharaja’s court, presented a rupee and told him his story. On hearing the oilman, the Maharaja ordered his sepoy to forthwith produce the moneylender to the court along with all the coins he had hoarded. When the moneylender came to him, he questioned him whether the oilman had deposited any money with him.

The wily moneylender replied, “This man has not kept a single paisa with me, Maharaj! He is telling a lie.”

The Maharaja then told the oilman to draw nearer and asked him if he had any written proof in support of his claim. The oilman beseeched, “I’ve nothing, Maharaj, except God for a witness!”

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1. The *kumbh* fair is held once every twelve years on the bank of *Ganga* at Haridwar

The Maharaja pondered awhile. He dismissed the court for the day, ordering the two parties to present themselves the following day to hear his verdict.

The next day, both the oilman and the moneylender came to the court. The Maharaja ordered that a basin of water be brought to him. The royal command was obeyed instantly.





The Maharaja put all the moneylender's coins into the water basin. Then he took them out one by one, segregating them in two heaps. When he had taken out all the rupee coins from the basin, the Maharaja counted the rupees in the smaller heap. They were exactly one hundred. He gave those rupees to the oilman and punished the moneylender for his dishonesty.

When the litigants had left, one of the courtiers asked, "Maharaj, how did you come to know that those coins belonged to the oilman and none else?"

"It was just a bit of common sense, nothing else!" replied the wise ruler. "The oilman had deposited his coins with the money lender one by one. The coins he came by had to be necessarily smeared with oil, with the poor fellow checking every single coin repeatedly with his oily hands for its genuineness. When I dropped these coins in water, they gave off oil globules and were thus identified."

## *A Tree of Babroo Cookies*

**Once** a brother and a sister went to a feast. They were given plenty of *babroo*<sup>1</sup> cookies there. The sister ate all that came to her share. But the brother brought the delicacies home and buried them in the backyard with the hope that they would grow into a tree and he would be having lots of *babroos* to eat for free.

In due time, a tree did spring up at the spot, laden with delicious *babroos*. One day the boy was plucking *babroos* atop the tree, when a wicked old woman approached him and asked for *babroos*. The boy told her that she may pick up the *babroos* fallen on the ground. The old woman reacted in anger: “Ram, Ram, I’m a frequent bather in the Holy Ganga and a native of the sacred *teerth*! How can you ask me to eat stale *babroos* fallen on the ground? Please bend the branch a bit so that I may have a couple of the fresh ones. Will you?” But when the boy bent the branch of the tree, the wicked hag caught hold of him. Pulling him down, she put him in her goatskin and proceeded towards her home.

On her way, she met a farmer who was ploughing his land. She said to him, “Brother, will you please watch my goatskin till I go and rinse my teeth and lips?”

When the old woman had gone, the boy spoke from inside the goatskin, “Brother peasant, I’ll serve you all my life if you release me from this misery!”

The peasant was shocked at the woman’s cruel deed. He took pity on the boy. Releasing him from the captivity, he filled the empty goatskin with big clods of earth.

In a short while, the old woman returned and picking up her goatskin, she resumed her journey. When the earthen clods in the goatskin pricked her

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1. A sweet leavened bread fried in ghee.



in the back, she gnashed her teeth and said, “*Kaffanuan*<sup>1</sup>! Go on; prick me to your heart’s content! Let me reach home and I’ll make a delicious *maddhra*<sup>2</sup> dish out of you!”



On reaching home, she entrusted the goatskin to her daughter and asked her to prepare sweet *maddhra*. Herself, she went again to rinse her teeth and lips. The daughter opened the goatskin in great anticipation, only to find earthen clods in it!

When the old woman returned home, her daughter shot at her in anger, “You evil widow! Why have you brought these clods for me?” The old woman

- 
1. Literally, a shroud; used as a term of abuse, it means one who is as dreadful as a shroud
  2. A sweet and sour preparation

had no answer to give. She was herself at her wits end. Immediately, she retraced her steps back to the *babroo* tree. On reaching there, she found that the boy was sitting atop the tree, eating *babroos*. As earlier, she stood below the tree and begged *babroos* from him once again. The boy told her to pick up those which had fallen on the ground. On hearing him, the old woman said again –

“Ram, Ram, I’m a frequenter bather of the Holy Ganga, a native of the sacred *teerth*! How can you ask me to eat stale *babroos* fallen on the ground? Please bend the branch a bit so that I may have a couple of the fresh ones. Will you?” As soon as the boy lowered the branch, she caught hold of him once again and putting him into her goatskin, started walking towards her home.

On her way, she met a few boys who were grazing cattle. The old woman kept the goatskin in their custody and went off to rinse her teeth and lips. As soon as she was out of sight, the boy inside the sack addressed the goatherds, “Brothers, please take me out of this misery. I will graze your goats for life!” The boys took pity on him and took him out of the goatskin. In the empty sack they filled wasps, scorpions and such other pests.

The old woman returned and resumed her homeward journey after picking up her goatskin. When the wasps and scorpions stung her, she gnashed her teeth and said,

“*Kaffanuan!* Pinch me now to your heart’s content. Let me reach home and I’ll make a delicious *maddhra* dish out of you!”

On reaching home, she entrusted the goatskin to her daughter and asked her to prepare sweet *maddhra*. Herself, she went again to rinse her teeth and lips. The daughter opened the goatskin in great anticipation, but was stung bitterly by wasps and scorpions that it contained!

By the time the old woman returned, she was aghast to see that her daughter’s face had swollen like a big sized *bhathura*<sup>1</sup>. When her daughter related to her how she was stung by a host of wasps and scorpions that came out of the goatskin, she resolved once again to teach the boy a lesson.

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1. Leavened, puffed bread



Taking hold of the empty goatskin, the old woman went back the *babroo* tree. The boy was again eating *babroos* atop the tree. The old woman asked him once again to give her some *babroos*. In response, the boy told her to pick up the *babroos* fallen on the ground. The old woman said –

“Ram, Ram, I’m a frequenter bather of the Holy Ganga, a native of the sacred *teerth*! How can you ask me to eat stale *babroos* fallen on the ground? Please bend the branch a bit so that I may have a couple of the fresh ones. Will you?” As soon as the boy lowered the branch, she caught hold of him once again and putting him into her goatskin, started walking towards her home. Addressing the boy in her captivity, she said, “Son, enough is enough. Today I’ll go straight to my home, without taking a breather anywhere on the way. At last, my daughter and I are going to relish *maddhra* made out of you!”

True to her word, the old woman carried the goatskin to her home without stopping anywhere. Entrusting her prize to her daughter, she proceeded to rinse her teeth and lips. The daughter opened the goatskin and was delighted to find the handsome boy inside. The boy had a round head. The girl asked him how he had come to have such a shapely head. The boy replied cleverly, “In my infancy, my head used to teem with lice. My mother killed all the lice by striking my head with a pestle. In bargain, my head was also beaten round like a ball.”

The girl had also been bothered by lice. She requested the boy to rid her head of the pests. Willingly, the boy put the girl’s head into the mortar and smashed it with a few powerful blows of the pestle. The boy then put on the dead girl’s clothes, boiled her flesh in a *kunni*<sup>1</sup>, and sat waiting for the old woman’s return.

The unsuspecting old woman ate with great appetite. A cat meowed past her, “*Buddhi*<sup>2</sup> eats her own daughter’s flesh!” It said. When the old woman asked what the cat meant, the boy in her daughter’s clothes told her not to mind anything and enjoy her repast. The cat again said, “Meow, meow, *Buddhi* eats her daughter’s flesh!”

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1. An earthen cooking pot

2. Old woman, the term is also used as a pejorative for an elderly woman

When the old woman had eaten to her heart's content, she asked that a cot be laid for her in a cool shady spot. The boy carried out her wish, putting the cot on the edge of a *khud* where stood a large shady tree. As the old woman lay on the cot for her siesta, the boy asked her, "Mother, what will I eat when you are dead?" The old woman replied, "Don't you worry, my daughter! Behind the hearth I have hidden a big pot. Dig it out. It contains enough money to last you a life-time." Having said this, the old woman dozed off.

The boy was waiting for this moment. He threw the cot along with the old woman down the *khud*. Then digging out the treasure from behind the hearth, he danced back to his home like a peacock.



## *A Guilty Conscience*

**T**here lived a King long ago. He was earnest and took pains to always keep his word. He shared the trials and tribulations of his people. The subjects were to him as dear as his own offspring. His one concern was to keep everyone happy and contented. Striving for the welfare of his kingdom, he kept awake till late at night. In matters of justice, he did not spare even his courtiers. Rightly, the King's fame had spread far and wide.

In the same city there lived a blacksmith. He too was very wise, skilled and efficient. One day, he heard a *kaarak*<sup>1</sup> from a wandering minstrel and thought that he too could write a poem. He resolved that he would recite his poem to the King, who was known for his generosity towards poets.

One day, as the blacksmith sat sharpening a sickle, the words poured out of his lips:

*“Moisten well, then scrape and grate,  
To let the keenness grow –  
The secret that you nurse in mind,  
That secret do I know!”*

The blacksmith was overjoyed on having hammered out his rhyme. He kept repeating the verse to himself endlessly. When he had mastered the lines, he went forth to recite his limerick to the ruler.

The King not only rewarded the man with a big prize, but he also had his lines inscribed on a huge banner and hung prominently on the wall facing his throne. An elated blacksmith returned home on having received the signal honour.

Now the King had a crafty vizier. For long the vizier had been secretly planning to get rid of his master and wrest the kingdom for himself. But all

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1. Dogri rhyme in praise of Gods, Goddesses, saints and martyrs

his devious plans had fallen flat till then. At last, he decided to get rid of the King altogether.

The vizier summoned the royal barber to his home and said, “Do me a favour and I will reward you handsomely!”

“And what’s the favour that this humble barber can grant you, *maharaj*<sup>1</sup>?”

“You go every morning to the King’s palace to shave him. All you have to do is to show the magic with your sharp blade. One skilful flourish with it and the deed will be done!”



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1. Form of address to show respect to a man of stature, not to be confused with the title of *Maharaja* which most of the Indian rulers assumed on ascending throne.



The greedy barber agreed to the vizier's evil suggestion to perform the gory act.

The next day when the barber was sharpening his razor for his treasonous act, his eyes accidentally fell on the writing on the palace wall:

*"Moisten well, then scrape and grate,*

*To let the keenness grow –*

*The secret that you nurse in mind,*

*That secret do I know!"*

The barber thought that the King already knew of the deadly secret that lay in his mind. His resolve was shaken. He shaved the King as usual and returned home quietly.

## ***The Iron Code***

**The** Raja of Roop Nagar had two queens. They had two daughters, Chainchalo and Champa. At 16, the princesses grew up to be as beautiful as fairies of the heavens. Yet, they differed in their temperament, just as any two children brought up in the same family might differ from each other. Champa, the senior queen's daughter, was serious in her disposition, but Chainchalo, born of the junior queen, was lively and outgoing. The two sisters were very close to each other.

Roop Nagar shared its boundaries with Preet Nagar. Its ruler had an only son, who turned out to be remarkably handsome. Once, while visiting a fair, the Prince of Preet Nagar happened to have a glimpse of Princess Chainchalo and instantly fell for her beauty. The princess too got enamoured of the charming prince. Soon enough, the lovers were exchanging messages of mutual adoration. But there stood an immense problem in their way: their fathers were sworn enemies, each waiting for a suitable occasion to humble the other. In these circumstances, the Prince could not muster enough courage to tell his father of his love for Princess Chainchalo.

Soon enough, the Prince found it hard to contain his emotions for long. One day, he went to his mother and disclosed to her the secret of his heart. The Rani of Preet Nagar trembled with fear for his sake. She knew only too well that her stubborn son would go to any lengths in pursuit of his desire, bringing about evil consequences to all concerned. But she was a fond mother after all. So, rather than dissuade the Prince from wooing the daughter of an adversary raja, she bided her time and took up his case with her husband. The Raja of Preet Nagar was furious. The heir to the throne of Preet Nagar marrying a Princess of Roop Nagar! It was unthinkable. But when the Rani explained to him that their son was equally adamant to have his way, the Raja gave in; and sent his Raj Purohit to the Raja of Preet Nagar asking for the hand of Princess Chainchalo for his son as well as lasting peace between the two kingdoms.



But, alas, there can never be any clapping with a single hand.

The offer was spurned by the ruler of Roop Nagar. “So now your raja has thought of a nice plan to grab our territories!” He exclaimed derisively to the Raj Purohit of Preet Nagar, “Tell him, I’ll rather see my daughter dead than marry her to the son of my sworn enemy!” The royal priest returned home a disappointed man. He told his King of the grouchy attitude of Princess Chainchalo’s father. The Raja of Preet Nagar was a wise man. He realized that the initiative of goodwill and amity was his; and now he must face the consequences. With great difficulty he refrained from sending a befitting reply to his adversary.

But the Prince of Preet Nagar was not the one to let the matter go that easily. He went incognito to Preet Nagar, and after suffering many a hardship, met his beloved, Princess Chainchalo in her palace. Once again, the Princess avowed her undying love for him. The two kept meeting each other in utter secrecy for several days. But such a state of affairs could not go on for long.

One day, the Prince of Preet Nagar told Princess Chainchalo that she should elope with him.

Chainchalo did not like this suggestion at first. But her sister Champa advised her: “Once a *pativrata*<sup>1</sup> women accepts a man as her husband, she follows him to the ends of the world!” Realising that her father would never consent to her marriage with the Prince, Chainchalo acquiesced with her lover.

On a pitch-dark night, she went away stealthily from her palace. The Prince was waiting for her in the darkness. He mounted her on his steed and sped away with her.

It did not take the lovers long to cross the boundaries of Roop Nagar. The Princess, clung to the bosom of the Prince, had dozen off while their horse was racing onwards. A new day was about to dawn. The Prince selected a nice spot and bridled his beast. Like an infant opening eyes when its cradle stops rollicking, the Princess woke up with the cessation of the movement.

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1. A woman loyal to her husband



The Prince dismounted from the horse quickly and took the Princess in his arms. Under the shade of a lush green tree, the lovers sat for a respite from their arduous journey.

After a while, they washed their faces in a small rivulet of crystal clear water that gurgled nearby. A cool breeze was blowing. The gentle rays of the morning sun filtered through the tree leaves and fell on them in colourful patterns. In those magical moments, the Prince and the Princess thought they did not have a worry in the world. All their fears and misgivings were dissolved in the prevailing calm.





It was then that the Prince of Preet Nagar asked Princess Chainchalo, "Tell me, my dear, were you not scared while coming out of your palace in the middle of the night?" "Not at all, my love!" Chainchalo replied, "I'm a daughter of daring parents! I have heard that my mother too had eloped with my father in this manner."

On hearing Chainchalo's reply, the Prince withdrew into silence. Something awful had happened to him. The Princess was clueless. Besides, the nightlong horse-ride had exhausted her. When she saw that the Prince had stopped talking to her, she fell asleep once again.

Meanwhile, a fire raged in the Prince's bosom on account of Chainchalo's disclosure. He pondered that if she had been so gamely running away with him, it was because her parents had committed a similar deed in their youth. It ran in her blood. One day, he reasoned, his own yet-to-be-born daughter might as well elope with a stranger. Beads of sweat sparkled on the Prince's forehead. He spoke aloud to himself, "I'll never allow such a poisonous tradition take roots in my family! Wise it is to nip the evil in the bud!" Resolutely taking hold of his sword, he went ahead and severed the sleeping Princess's head from her body.

The Prince had placed his family's honour much above his own love.

Yet, after slaying the Princess, he could not move from the spot; but kept looking at his beloved's lifeless face. How innocent and charming she had been! After her demise, life had nothing to offer him now. He waited eagerly for the soldiers of Roop Nagar to arrive so he could surrender to them along with the Princess's remains.

It was a long wait. The sun rose to the zenith and then coursed slowly to the western horizon. The Prince, however, did not budge from the side of the dead Princess. At last there was the sound of horses' hooves approaching from a distance. The Prince knew his time had come.

The riders were indeed the Raja of Roop Nagar and his soldiers. They drew reins at the sight of the Prince. With swords drawn, they approached him. The Prince sat motionless. "What have you done!" They shrieked in horror on seeing the Princess's corpse. The Raja also approached slowly. In deference



to him, the Prince stood up. He turned his face away as the aged father caught the last glimpse of his dead child.

Sitting close to the body, the King mourned his loss silently, without shedding a tear. He was at his wits end. If this young man had stolen his daughter from him, he would not have killed her. Then who had committed the second crime?

The Prince confessed everything to him truthfully.

The Raja saw in his mind's eye how during the days of his youth he had persuaded Chainchalo's mother, the Princess of Chamba, to run away with him. Shame brought his head down. At the same time, he could not help admiring the young prince of Preet Nagar for his high principles.

The scandal spread throughout the country like wild fire. Everyone talked about the murder of Princess Chainchalo. The Prince was brought to Roop Nagar in shackles. Everyone thought that he would be executed in a day or two.

In the palace, Princess Champa not only waited eagerly for the moment her sister's murderer would be hanged, but she also wanted to spit on his face before he was executed. Her grief was compounded with a sense of deep remorse. It was she who had persuaded Chainchalo to elope with the wretched prisoner. Going by her advice Poor Chainchalo had accompanied him like a *pativrata* woman! Who else but a demented man could find such chaste sentiments unwholesome?

But it came as a surprise to one and all when the Raja of Roop Nagar granted the convict full pardon. Not only that, the ruler proclaimed his desire to give the murderer his second daughter, Champa, in marriage!

Champa became furious on knowing that she was going to be married to a cowardly prince who had murdered her dearest sister in cold blood. First he had asked her to elope with him and then, laying all the blame on her, he had proceeded to kill her! Such a wicked man could never be her husband. She tried to reason with her father.

But a royal decree was inviolable. Not even a Princess could defy it!

The day of the wedding drew near. The groom's party was to arrive from Preet Nagar. The erstwhile enemies were becoming friends. Paeans were being



sung in praise of the Prince's virtues. But in the eyes of Princess Champa, he had remained a coward. She was determined never to give her hand willingly in the blood-smeared hands of the Prince.

There was only one way Champa could fulfill her resolve, and that was what she did.

When the King took her hand to place in the hands of the Prince, he felt that it was as cold as ice. The Princess had already gone to a place from where no one could bring her back. She had consumed a potent poison.

Princess Champa of Roop Nagar too had followed her code of honour!

## *The Deed and the Intent*

*In* a village there lived a thief. He stole what he could and sold it cheap. One day he broke into a house where a man had died lately and his kin had gone to cremate him. The thief was happy at the prospect of robbing the house.

But when he entered the building, he found that the village priest was reciting from a funeral text, *Garuda Purana*, narrating what happened to a man after he passed over to the other world. The thief joined some men and women who set crossed-legged before the pundit listening to him intently. Good deeds, the preacher said, bore good fruit and evil ones brought ill consequences. The burglar was alarmed: he had been stealing and committing sins till now. There was not one good deed he could claim to his merit. What would become of him when he died! When everyone had left the house, the burglar approached the pundit. “*Maharaj*,” he implored, “I have been a sinner all my life. Show me the righteous path so that I may atone my wrong doings.”

“I am not that well versed in the scriptures,” replied the village priest. “It would be better if you approached the hermit who lives in isolation on the top of the yonder mountain peak. He is wise and omniscient. He will guide you properly.”

The thief went to the hermit. Bowing humbly to the wise man, he narrated his problem to him. The hermit gave him a black flag, directing him thus, “My son, you should perform a pilgrimage to all the *teerthas*<sup>1</sup> in the country along with the black banner I have given you. Make it a point to take bath along with the banner at every single *teeratha* you visit. Your quest would stop at the *teeratha* where the black of this banner turns white.”

Abiding by the sage’s advice, the thief performed pilgrimage to all the sacred places and took bath at all the sacred places, yet his banner remained

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1. Sacred places where the Hindus congregate to atone their sins



as black as it was. Despondently, he decided to return home. The path led through a thick jungle. He had gone half the way when it fell dark. Out of fright, he climbed up a tree to spend the night. It was about midnight when he heard the wails of a woman. Moved by compassion, the thief descended from the top of the tree to render help. Led by the sound of loud wailing, he had hardly gone a few paces when a pitiful sight met his eyes. A band of dacoits had looted a marriage party and their leader was dragging the helpless bride.

The thief was clever. He saw that it would be foolhardy for him to fight all those violent men. A better course of action for him would be to mingle with them and bide his time. Having decided upon his course of action, he went to the *sardar*<sup>1</sup> of the dacoits and persuaded him to take him in his gang. Mixing up skillfully with the looters, he snatched away an unwary dacoit's sword at the first opportunity and killed all the abductors with it.

The young woman thanked him for having saved her life. She told him that those men would surely have killed her since some of her own servants had connived with the dacoits and they were now afraid of the dire punishment if she was allowed to remain alive and bear witness to their evil deed.

The thief accompanied the woman to her house. Her folks were very glad to see her safe and sound amongst them. They offered him a huge reward, but the thief did not accept anything in return for his good deed. He returned to the spot where he had slayed the dacoits. His flag was lying there. Drenched in their blood, it had turned white.

The thief's surprise knew no end. He went to the holy man and after narrating his recent experiences, enquired, "*Maharaj*, I took bath at each and every sacred place and washed this flag too. But it didn't change its colour. But when I killed ten people in the jungle, it turned white. Why?"

The sage was amused at the thief's childlike innocence', "Son, "he said, "the sins that you had committed earlier arose out of your greed, but in killing those ten violent men, you were not driven by any selfish motive.

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1. Here, the chief of dacoits



You killed them in order to help someone in distress. Yours was an act of pure selflessness. No wonder, the flag turned white as a result of your noble deed.”

From that day on, the thief discarded his sinful profession and became a devout person.



## *Surgal Nag*

**Namblan** was the impetuous queen of Maharaja Bhair, the ruler of Jammu. She was unhappy because she had remained childless even after long years of marriage. In dejection, she performed penances to appease Lord Shiva by restricting her meals to one time a day, sleeping on bare earth and so forth. For twelve years she kept this arduous routine, but alas, to no avail. Anguished, she went one night to the residence of Nainu, the ironsmith. Waking him up, she urged him, “Brother Nainu, I don’t want to live any longer. Make me quickly a scaffold on which I may hang myself.” The poor ironsmith got flustered. “Queen Namblan, I beg your pardon, but how can I carry out your command. The Raja will have me skinned alive!”

But after much vacillation, Nainu, the ironsmith, came round to make an iron scaffold for Namblan. She took it to the Kajli forest, and installed it there to put an end to her life. Lord Shiva happened to be deep in meditation then. His *samadhi*<sup>1</sup> was broken all of a sudden. He ordered his *ganas*<sup>2</sup> to find out the cause. The divine attendants did not take long to bring Him the tidings. “Maharaj,” they spoke in unison, “your devout follower, Queen Namblan of Jammu, is going to hang herself to death from a scaffold she has erected in the yonder forest of Kajli.”

Instantly, Lord Shiva reached the spot, “Namblan,” He enquired of her, “what dire fate has befallen you that you are bent upon taking your life? Has anybody spoken ill of you?”

“Nobody dare speak ill of me, O Lord! Nor has any blow of misfortune stuck me. But I’m disillusioned with the world and wish to put an end to my miserable existence.”

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1. A state of deep meditation

2. The impish attendants of Lord Shiva

“Disillusionment with the world comes with advanced age or great learning. You have neither, Queen Namblan. Now tell me this instant what has beleaguered you, or else I go!”

The queen was driven to tears at her deity’s mild rebuke. With a choked throat she remonstrated with Him, “Go, away, Maharaj, if that’s your wish! It seems I have been worshipping a false Shiva all this time. For twelve years I have tried to propitiate You and I have not yet been blessed with a son! I don’t want to live any longer in this barren state!”





Lord Shiva was moved by the misery of His devotee. Taking out a pinch of *vibhuti*<sup>1</sup> from his bag, He offered it to Queen Namblan. “Eat some, drink some and conserve some in your *Karandu*<sup>2</sup>. You will be a mother to a divine son!”

Queen Namblan wiped off the tears from her face and accepted the sacred ash from him. She returned home in a joyous mood. In due course, a son was born to her. The infant appeared to have descended indeed from *swarga*. On the fifth day of his birth, the elated mother aptly named him ‘Surgal’. As the infant grew up, a special cradle was crafted for him out of sandalwood and decorated with strands of finest silk. While little Surgal sat playing in it, a wet nurse rocked the cradle gently, singing:

*Queen Namblan brought the sacred vibhuti to the palace;  
And bore a heavenly son,  
On the auspicious day of the Prince's birth,  
The Naga maidens danced in jubilation  
To the beat of drums and the naubat<sup>3</sup>*

Romping in his cradle, the little Prince felt hungry quite often. Every time he cried for milk, Queen Namblan was at hand. She would herself mix sugar and milk in a bowl. Then dousing a clean piece of cloth in the sweetened milk, she would squeeze it into her son's throat, singing sweet lullabies to him:

*Lullaby, I sing a lullaby to you, O Naga,  
A bowlful of milk I bring you, O Naga,  
Sweetened with sugar it is, O Naga  
I squeeze it into your throat, O Naga,  
Swallow, O Naga, swallow it, my cute little one!*

Because he was born out of a boon of Lord Shiva, Surgal had acquired such spiritual powers that any needy man who went to his place returned a happy man. If a sick man approached him, Surgal would wave his magical

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1. Sacred ash which Lord Shiva offered as boon to His devotees
  2. A wicker basket
  3. A musical instrument

wand over him and the disease would leave the ailing man forever. Likewise, he cured men of snakebites and also of hydrophobia with the waving of his magical wand. Baba Surgal could cure the sick of the most complicated of diseases merely by administering to them two and half sips of sanctified water. He also possessed the power to relieve a devotee of the worst calamity with nothing but a string of raw cotton and a pinch of dust!

In his old age, Baba Surgal undertook a pilgrimage to Haridwar. He took several dips into the sacred Ganga at the Har ki Pauri<sup>1</sup>, reciting the holy name of Hari:

The Naga trailed the whole land and reached Haridwar,  
There the Baba sat on seven steps,  
Seven dips he took, reciting the holy name of the Lord,  
Surgal bathed in the Ganga!

The people of Jammu province have immense faith in Baba Surgal's healing powers and He is worshipped in every home.

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1. The famous spot on the bank of the Holy Ganga at Haridwar, where the devout Hindus bathe for absolution and earn religious merit – the (Hindi) expression literally means 'a step-ladder to Hari'.



## *The Untouchable*

**There** is a small hamlet by the name of Thati, to the south of Krimchi, near Udhampur. The ruins of a palace can still be seen on a hillock adjacent to this village. The locals will tell you that the place was called Gopalpur in its hay days. It used to be a flourishing town then.

Raja Bhim Singh was the king of Gopalpur. He was a mighty king, who loved his subjects dearly. Like King Bikram of the yore, he went about incognito in his territories to keep himself abreast of the condition of his people. His compassion was legendry. Never did a man return from his palace on hungry stomach. Raja Bhim Singh was famous too for his justice. It was said of him that like the proverbial *hansa*, he could set apart milk from water.

The Raja's spouse was equally pious and compassionate. Her name was Saroj, which in Sanskrit means lotus. True to her name, she was dainty in her presence. When she arrived, done up in her finery, in the Audience Hall, it seemed as if full moon had risen on a winter night. The subjects simply adored her and counted her presence amongst the boons God had showered on them.

But mysterious are the ways of God. One fine morning when the raja got up, he was astonished to see a long black hair growing out of the center of his palm.

A hair growing out of one's palm is quite an unseemly sight. The palace physicians did not spare any effort to rid the raja of the unsightly hair, but it growth went on unabated in spite of all their ministrations. The raja became despondent. His queen too was alarmed.

At last, a wise man from a distant land happened to pass by Raja Bhim Singh's kingdom. He examined the hair closely and told him, "Only if you could eat bread prepared by a lowly *chandaal*<sup>1</sup>, this hair of yours will go

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1. Untouchable



away at once. It is nothing but a malady brought about by your karma, O Raja, I assure you! You'll be immediately cured."

The Raja kept mum on hearing the wise man's advice.

Those days the society was ridden with the caste system. If a person belonging to a low caste happened to do as much as cast his shadow on a man of a high caste, the latter had to take a bath to purify himself. It was unthinkable for a person of the Raja's stature to eat food cooked by a low caste *chandaal*.





For he was the King and it was not given to him to break the prevailing customs. The matter was resolved when Queen Saroj persuaded the Raja to go for the remedy, regardless of the consequences.

A message was sent to the town's *chandaal* that the Raja would be coming to share meals with him the following day. The *chandaal* informed his wife. The woman was much perturbed. "It's just not done!" she said. "He's our King! If we serve him meals cooked by us, he will lose caste and the whole country will rise against us; but if we don't, the King will have us killed for disobeying his command!" The *chandaal* calmed her with great effort. The woman then cleaned her house, washed utensils and took ablutions before cooking her simple fare as best she could.

The Raja came to the *chandaal*'s home at the appointed hour and after taking a morsel from the proffered plate, returned to his palace. But to his utter dismay, the ugly hair on his palm remained as strong as it was. An irate Raja had the wise man summoned before him. It was on this man's word that he had broken with tradition and nearly lost his caste by eating at the home of a lowly *chandaal*. In utter rage, the Raja cried at the top of his voice that the wise man was to be skinned alive and hung on the town square for everyone to see!

Presently, the wise man was brought before the Raja. Bowing low before the ruler, he enquired what wrong he had committed to merit such a harsh treatment. "You have," the Raja thundered, "on the pretext of suggesting a cure for my palm, made me eat food cooked by a *chandaal* and corrupted my *dharma*. And now you have the cheek to ask me what wrong you have committed!"

The wise man listened to each and every word uttered by the Raja. Then he spoke, "Maharaj, I am the humblest of your minions. How could I suggest anything that went against the interest of your majesty? The people who hosted my liege lord may be low-born by birth, but they, by virtue of their deeds, are certainly not outcaste. I will give you the whereabouts of a certain Brahmin peasant who lives in your territory. You may go to him and eat there. I put my own life at wager if you are not cured instantly!" The Raja agreed to give the wise man's suggestion a try.



The very next morning he visited the Brahmin's home in disguise. The wife was preparing the main meal of the day for her husband, unmindful of the scatter all round the hearth. On one side, a dog was licking the used utensils, and on another, a cat had wiped an earthen *kunni* clean with its tongue. Close by, an infant had vomited and flies were hovering over the vomit. The Raja was put off by all that he witnessed, but his self interest moved him to go on. "Noble soul," he requested the woman, "I have come from a far off place. Would you give me a piece of bread? I'm dying of hunger." The lady of the house, rather than acceding to the visitor's request, picked up a burning cinder from her *chulha* and made a gesture as if she were going to set him on fire. The valiant Raja made good his escape with great difficulty.

But when the woman left her house to deliver food to her husband, the Raja followed her stealthily to the Brahmin's farm. Here, he spied the goings on from behind a tree. A filthy man, clad in dirty rags, the Brahmin was flogging his oxen mercilessly. The bleeding oxen got a respite only when the man caught the sight of his wife. He then left the beasts standing in their harness and grabbing the *potli*<sup>1</sup> of food from his wife, starting eating with his grubby, blood-stained hands.

The man was devouring his food as if he had never eaten all his life. Worried that there will be nothing left for him in a moment, the Raja hurriedly came out of his hiding and approached the Brahmin for a piece of *roti*. But all he got from him was filthy abuse. When the Raja persisted in his request for any leftovers, the Brahmin grew violent and threatened to beat the daylights out of him with the stout staff he had kept close by. The Raja, however, could not afford to give up so easily. He decided to bide his time till the Brahmin couple had left the farm for the day and look for a chance crumb on the spot. In the evening, when the man and his wife had gone home, the Raja walked back to the place and found a small piece of *roti* lying on the ground. He picked it up, and after removing the loose dirt, put it in his mouth. To his surprise, the hair on palm wilted away instantly and fell on the ground.

The following day, Raja Bhim Singh held a special *darbar* to honour the wise man with a big award. He told the gathered gentry that birth alone did not make one a Brahmin, or for that matter, a *chandaal*.

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1. A bundle tied in a cloth



## *Charity*

**Once** upon a time Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi had an interesting argument amongst themselves: who amongst the mortals was their greatest follower – a man of riches, or a man steeped in poverty. Lakshmi said it was a wealthy man. Vishnu said, no, it was a poor man. Lakshmi reminded Her Divine Spouse that it was a wealthy man who could provide the means for building temples, decorate the idols in all their splendour and buy material for conducting the *puja*. A penniless man could do nothing but merely stand before the deity with folded hands.

To put their arguments to test, Lord Vishnu proposed to Lakshmi to descend to the mortal world. The Goddess of Wealth readily agreed. They transformed themselves into an old couple and started walking on a road. Their magic had drenched the land in torrential rains. Holding sticks in their hands, they knocked at the door of the city's wealthiest man. After a while, a man who was shouting aloud from inside the house, opened the door. "What do you want?" he asked them curtly.

The old man and his equally decrepit wife were shivering and wet to the skin. "It's very cold outside, sir," said God in the beggar's dress. "It is already dusk, and there is no place for us to go. Would you be kind enough to let us spend the night under your roof? We won't require anything else."

The rich householder lost his patience on hearing Vishnu's plea. "Did you have nowhere else to go and give up the ghost?" He shouted at Him, "Look at your faces! Some guests I have got! Now make yourself scarce from here, or else..."

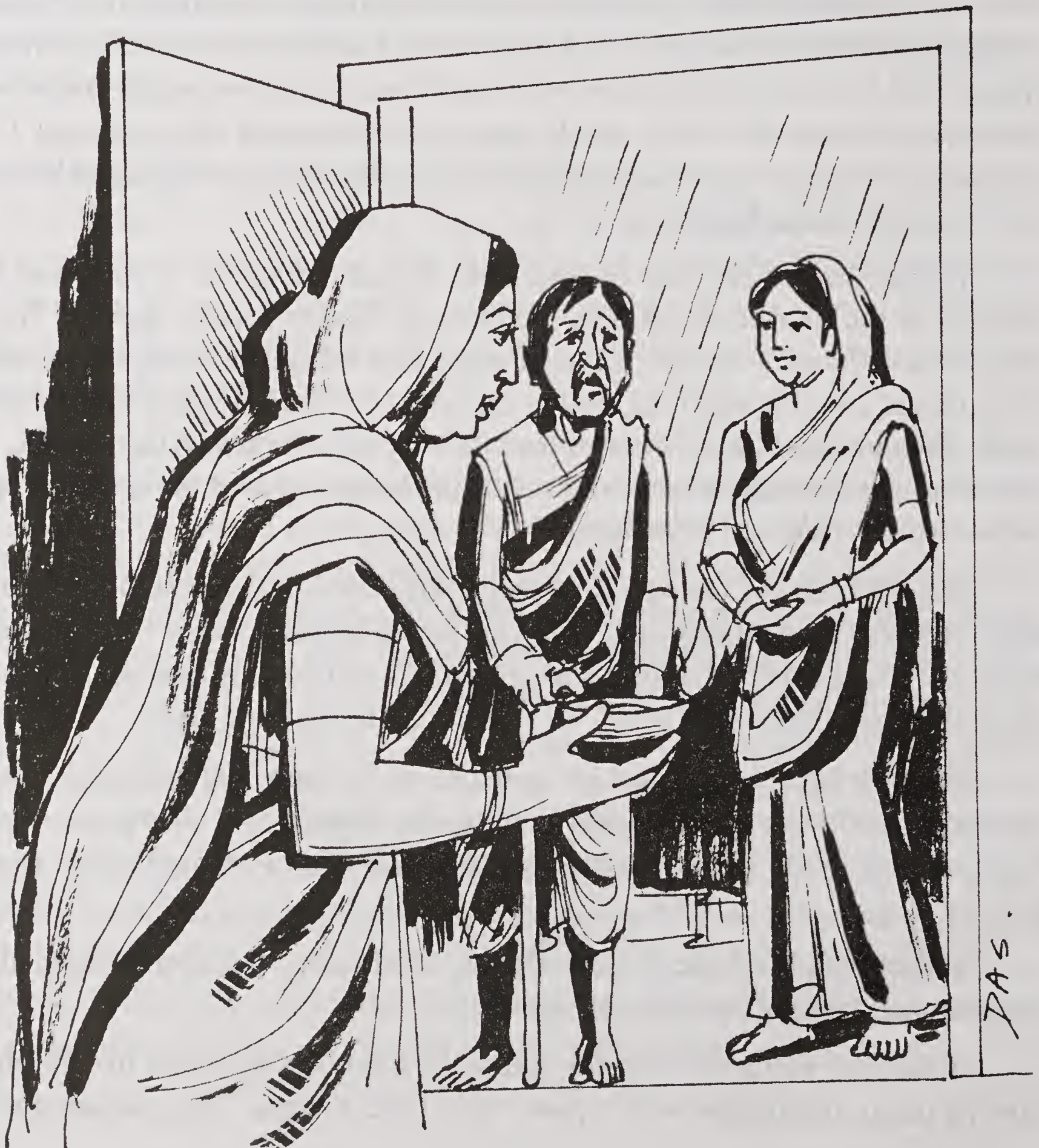
Before either of the Divine Beings could say anything further, the arrogant man banged the door shut on them.

"Lakshmi, you have seen for yourself a man of wealth and his charity! Now let us go to someone who is poor," said Lord Vishnu. They walked down



to another part of the city till they had reached a particularly humble dwelling. Its walls were crumbling and rain water had seeped through its ceiling.

As soon as they knocked at the door, an old woman opened it. She was holding an earthen lamp in her hands. On seeing them shivering in cold, the aged lady was moved to pity. She invited them to enter her home. Spreading a broken cot for them to sit on, she proceeded to arrange a change for their wet clothes. She offered her own dry set of clothes to Lakshmi and her husband's clothes to Vishnu.





When the guests had changed into dry clothes, the woman brought them whatever little food she could scrape from her nearly empty vessels. The guests ate the fare and lay down to sleep on the cot.

In the meanwhile, the aged master of the house also arrived. "Who are they?" he asked his wife. "I don't know," said the old woman. "They just happened to drop by our house. The old man was all wet and trembling with cold, and so was his wife. I have given them our clothes to change. The supper I had prepared for the night has also gone to them. I'm afraid, my dear husband, there is nothing left for us to eat tonight."

The elderly man listened to his wife calmly and said nothing. The woman spread a quilt on a dry patch of the rough floor and then both of them lay down to sleep.

When they woke up the next morning, the elderly man and his wife could not believe their eyes. In place of their run down hut, there stood a splendid mansion, ready to fulfil their slightest wishes. But hard as they tried, they could not find their guests of the previous night!

## *Baba Kaura*

**Raja** Jaspal was an impulsive ruler. From his citadel near Sundrikot on the hillside of Kathua, he held his sway over some of the adjoining villages.

Once, the raja went on a hunt. He sighted a *pijjari*<sup>1</sup> and started to pursue the beast vigorously. So intense was the raja's pursuit that his followers were left behind and even the clothes that he wore were torn to tatters because of the bushes and brambles in the wilderness. The *pijjari* remained beyond his reach. In the bargain, he was exhausted, hungry and had lost his way.

Cursing the day, Raja Jaspal wended his way to a house. The owners took him for a common traveler and allowed him to spend the night in their veranda, offering him a couple of *todahs* to eat. The following day, when the raja did not wake up till late in the morning, the young daughter of the house came to wake him up. "I have to sweep the verandah" she said to him, "you would better get up now and be on your way!" The raja sprang up abruptly from his bed. One look at the girl's face and he was bewitched by her beauty.

He stretched his limbs, washed his face and left the house. Much later, his followers happened to pass by looking for their master. It was then that the whole village came to know that Raja Jaspal had stayed for a night at Thakur Sohnu's house.

Not many days had passed when the Raja's *bandoockachis*<sup>2</sup> knocked at the Thakur's door and brought him the Raja's summons. Alarmed, the poor old man thought he must have angered the hotheaded ruler – though unknowingly – to merit the call. So with a heart throbbing with fear and anxiety, Thakur Sohnu presented himself before the raja. But he was in for a surprise.

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1. A goat-like animal, hunted for its flesh

2. Literally, wielders of old fashioned gun, here the musclemen of the feudal lord



Rather than punishing him for a lapse, Raja Jaspal sought the *dola*<sup>1</sup> of his daughter.

The marriage was solemnized, but only on the condition that the new queen would be build an exclusive palace to live.



The Raja, who had already become a slave to her ravishing beauty, ordered the construction of a new palace for his favourite queen. But where was the money to come from? His *diwan*<sup>2</sup> advised him to impose an additional tax of five paise on each head of cattle the subjects held. A proclamation was made that everyone was to deposit the tax in a month's time, or face forfeiture of their cattle.

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1. Literally, the special palanquin used for carrying a bride to her groom's place, here the expression signifies the raja's proposal to marry the girl
  2. The chief revenue officer



The people were shocked. “For building his own palace, he’s robbing us of our huts,” they sighed. Anyhow, a few subjects went ahead to deposit the due amount with the treasury to escape the Raja’s ire. But most of the people lived hand to mouth. How could they meet the demand? They were neither in a position to pay the tax, nor could they resist the raja’s headstrong *bandoockachis* who assaulted them ruthlessly and carried away their cattle along with whatever valuable they could pick up from their miserable dwellings.

In the same land lived a Brahmin by the name Kaura. Though adamant by nature, Baba Kaura was highly respected for his fair dealings. He happened those days to be on a pilgrimage. His wife was alone at home as they did not have any child.

One day the raja’s *bandoockachis* descended on Kaura’s house too. The housewife protested, “Please give us some time till Pantji returns home. Sky is not going to fall in four or five days!” But the determined minions of the autocratic raja paid a deaf ear to her and released both the oxen of the household. Now those oxen were renowned for their mettle. On seeing that a stranger had dared touch them, one of the beasts lifted a *bandoockachi* on its horns and threw him on the ground. This invited the wrath of the other *Bandoockachis*. Together, they pounced on the mighty ox and broke his horns. Then they beat both the beasts mercilessly before leading them away.

Baba Kaura returned home a few days later and was beside himself with rage when his wife narrated to him the whole incident. Instantly, he strode towards the raja’s *mandi*. His wife tried to reason with him, but who has ever succeeded in holding back a river in spate or an obstinate Brahmin in full fury! Seeing him thus, the palace guards closed the doors and drew their swords. When Baba Kaura found that there was no way to reach the raja, he came out of the precincts and climbed a tall tree. And there he sat in determination.

The guards sent in a message to the Raja, who asked his *raj-purohit* to deal with the recalcitrant Brahmin.

The matter would have perhaps been settled amicably had the *raj-purohit* used his tact and understanding. Instead, the royal priest fell to poking fun at the irate Brahmin. “O Panta,” he shouted at him mockingly, “have you climbed



the banyan tree to relish its delicious *gullan*<sup>1</sup>?” Unable to bear the mockery of *raj-purohit*, Baba Kaura plunged a dagger deep into his own chest. Blood sprang out furiously from the wound and his body fell down from the tree with a loud thud. The news that the raja’s tyranny had forced a poor Brahmin to commit suicide spread like a wild fire.

Raja Jaspal felt guilty. He was pestered with visions of Baba Kaura standing with a dagger in his hand. At night, he did not have a wink of sleep but kept wandering in his palace. During the day he heard voices, “Raja, you’re evil! Return my oxen to me! Revoke the new tax you have levied on your poor subjects!” In the midst of the daily routine of the court, the Raja would abruptly cry out, “Look, Baba Kaura has come!” And then he would run away in his demented state. Sitting down to his meals, he would see maggots wriggling in his plate and worms twirling in his dishes, instead of nicely cooked rice and delicious curries. Instead of water, what he saw was raw blood in his glass.

The Raja invited famed tantriks to free himself of the terrible burden of *Brahmhatya*<sup>2</sup>. He revoked the much maligned cattle tax, and resolved not to spend a single paise more on the construction of the unfinished palace. Instead, he ordered that *samadhis*<sup>3</sup> of Baba Kaura and his spouse be constructed to keep alive their memory. It was then that Raja Jaspal could regain a modicum of peace.

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1. The fruit of a banyan tree
  2. For the Kshtriya rulers of the yore, a terrible sin of killing a Brahmin
  3. Memorials erected to the martyrs, holy men etc

## *Raja Bhair*

**This** is the tale of Raja Bhair, a scion of the Naga dynasty.

Long long ago, Vasuki, the Naga, was the King of Jammu. He had, all told, eighty-four sons and grandsons; the prominent amongst them being Kai, Bhair, Chourasu, Kaalsu, Lunsu, Dhansar, Maansar, Chilak, Milak, Soungali, and so forth. Prince Kai was the eldest of the Raja's sons and Prince Bhair was younger to him. The former was born to Queen Kapuri and the latter to Queen Bairi Nagini:





Once, old King Vasuki fell gravely ill. After a great deal of deliberation, the attending physicians said to him, “*Maharaj*, your ailment requires drastic treatment. The blisters on your body would go away if only you could bathe in the pristine waters of the sacred lake at the foot of Mount Kailash! But given the present state of your health, we cannot advise you to undertake the arduous journey.”

“If I cannot travel to Mount Kailash, then the waters of the holy lake will have to be brought down to me,” said the Raja. It was a colossal task indeed. King Vasuki called forth a great conclave of the eight tribes of the Nagas and proclaimed before them. “I bequeath the reign of Jammu to the first man who brings me a stream from the holy Kailash!

*“Bairi Nagini bore me Prince Bhair;  
And Kapuri has borne Prince Kai,  
The Crown of Jammu shall go to him  
Who brings me the river Tawi!”*

The Naga princes, each one in a hurry to oblige the ailing King, went far and wide in search of the healing river. But young Bhair turned out to be the most cunning of them all. Rather than squandering his energy and time in a pointless search, he followed the straight route to the Kailash lake to achieve his aim.

But when he reached there, Bhair was in for a surprise. The place had not one, but several large bodies of water. Which one would be of use to the King, he wondered. At last, he chose the *Kali kund*<sup>1</sup>, which was blocked by a huge rock. Applying his back to the restraining rock, he toppled it aside and hurriedly scampered out of the way of the surging waters. Crystal clear water gushed forth from the basin. The prince strode beside the stream and thus became the first man to have created the river *Bhair*. In due course, the river Bhair wended its way through numerous mountains and hills and reached the city of Jammu. The river is now known as the ‘*Tau*’ or ‘*Tawi*’. The ancient palace of the Dogra princes is located on the right bank of the *Tawi*.

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1. Tank

Finding the river by his doorstep, King Vasuki was beside himself with joy. He kept on diving into it till all the traces of his ailment had gone from his body. Then, in keeping with his word, he abdicated the throne and anointed Prince Bhair the King of Jammu.

Prince Kai was also not sitting idle. He too had endeavoured in his own manner to carry out King Vasuki's command. Hurrying back with a huge vessel of water, he was expecting to be the first one to reach the kingdom. But someone told him on the way that his step-brother, Prince Bhair, had already brought a whole stream for the King to dive in. Prince Kai was furious. Dashing the water vessel on ground, he turned back instantly. The spot on which he had spun around in rage became a gorge, while the water that had spilled out from the pot went on to form the river *Chandrabhaga*<sup>1</sup>. Unmindful of what he had created, the prince reached Akhnoor, where he forcibly took over the reins of the government and declared himself the king.

Now Jammu had King Bhair and Akhnoor, King Kai:

*Having brought the Tawi hurtling down,  
The cunning Bhair got the Jammu crown;  
Prince Kai withdrew like an angry boor  
And wrenched away the pretty Akhnoor!*

Allan and Tallan, two chieftains of King Bhair, had conspired together to truss up their master and throw him into the waters. When Bhair got the wind of it, he supplicated before Goddess Kalika and got rid of his enemies.

King Bhair's queen was Nambla and their son was named Prince Surgal. In his old age, King Bhair took up his residence at Kandoli Nagrota, which is known as Baba Bhair's lair even to this day.

Kandoli Nagrota is located on the National Highway to Srinagar at a short distance from the modern town of Jammu.

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1. This river is now known by the name of '*Chenab*'



## *Sati Trippan*

A long time ago, there lived in Ramgarh-Khirdi, a village some fifty kilometers from Jammu, a Brahmin of Basnotra clan. His name was Prehlad and his wife's name was Paroli. They were a pious couple who observed all the ritual punctiliously and devotedly served hermits and sages.

Prehlad and Paroli had two daughters and a son by the name of Kanha. The older daughter was called Trippan and the younger one, Bhotan. The two sisters had beautiful features, though it is said that Trippan's beauty was of an uncommon kind. While Bhotan kept herself busy with the household chores, Trippan from her childhood was religiously inclined. She spent hours together in deep meditation and was well known for piety.

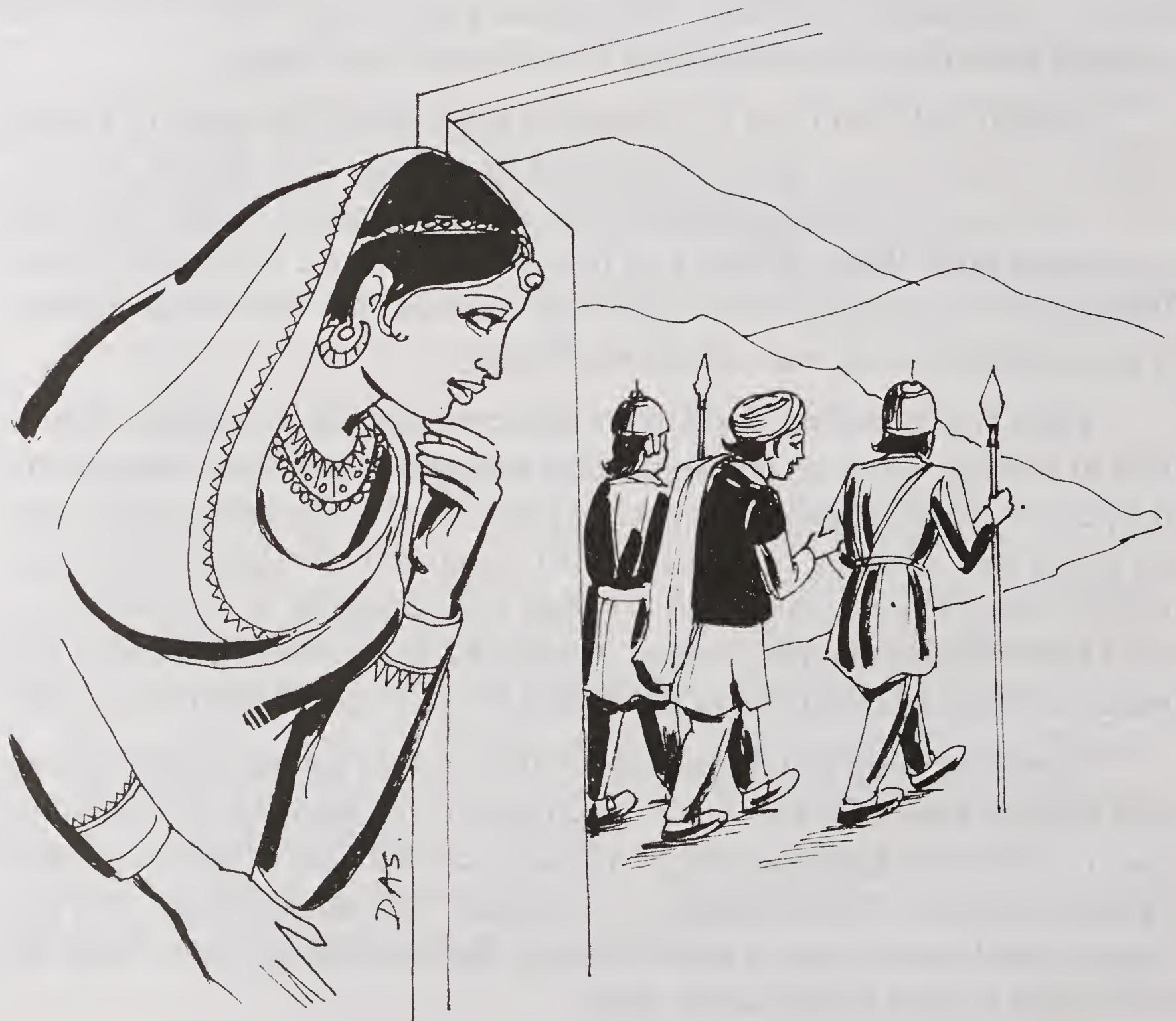
There was an ancient Sati's *dehri* on the outskirts of the village. Trippan used to visit the shrine on the festive days and spend long hours sitting there in a pensive mood. The moment anyone asked her why she behaved like that, she would start shedding copious tears. No one could understand the language of these tears. On rare occasions, Trippan would confide in her mother, "I don't know the reason, but, Amma, whenever I stand before this *dehri*, I'm overcome with sadness and tears start falling from my eyes of their own accord!"

Trippan grew up with the passage of time and her parents started looking for a suitable match for her. Their search ended with Hansraj, the illustrious scion of a Brahmin family of village Ambara, near Akhnoor. Prehlad organized a grand ceremony for his daughter's wedding. The whole village said that Trippan and Hansraj made a perfect match. But alas! No one knew what the destiny had in store for the newly weds.

Poor Trippan had a tearful parting with her parents and siblings in such an ominous moment that she never saw them again! For the rituals at her in-laws place at Ambara had not yet been concluded, when her groom Hansraj was summoned to present himself before the royal court.

Those days Raja Sukhdev Singh adorned the throne of Akhnoor. Hansraj used to be his favourite priest. It was he who conducted various religious ceremonies and rituals for him. But royal favour is fleeting. The raja was displeased with Hansraj over some insignificant detail. As a consequence, Hansraj too had stopped frequenting the palace.

Seeing now the royal messenger at his doorstep, Hansraj felt slightly afraid. But the royal summons had to be obeyed. Unwillingly, he followed the raja's herald.



He had left the house in the morning and did not return till late in the afternoon. Hansraj's kinsmen became anxious. Meanwhile, a man who was returning from Akhnoor told his people, "There was great turmoil



around the palace! I heard city folks talking among themselves. It seems some calamity has befallen Pant Hansraj.” The man’s half digested conversation reached Hansraj’s home and they all fell into mourning. Trippan struck her head with both her hands and went into an empty room which she bolted from inside.

The sun had set and still there was no news from the palace. Sitting alone in the dim light of an earthen lamp, Trippan imagined the worst for her husband. A life without him, she could not think of. If destiny had not allowed them to unite in this life, she would meet him in the next, she resolved. Standing against a pillar, she recalled the name of her husband one last time and set herself on fire with the earthen lamp. The bride’s crimson silk *paranda*<sup>1</sup> she wore, caught fire easily, and in a moment, she was engulfed in flames. Presently, the relatives noticed gusts of smoke and fire coming out of the closed room. They broke open the solid door with some force. But by that time, it was too late. Trippan was dead.

Just at that moment, Pant Hansraj returned home. Short of breath, he told his relatives how he had come running all the way from raja’s palace. There was indeed a clamour in the palace, but not because of him. It was on account of a royal horse gone berserk. When someone told him that the false rumour about raja’s displeasure was causing great anxiety among his kin, he had rushed back with all speed.

Hansraj’s people did not quite know whether to feel happy at his well-being or to grieve at Trippan’s demise.

The *dehri* of Sati Trippan is still in existence in Ambara. An annual fair is held on the spot in her memory.

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1. A decorative plait used by women to keep their hair in place.

## *Sail Patthar*<sup>1</sup>

**There**, ensconced in the hills of Pauni Bharakh<sup>2</sup>, is a village called Dhanua. Dhanua is a special place, marked with tall, majestic pines and endlessly blowing winds. The hillside is covered with countless statues carved out of stone. There are statues of shopkeepers weighing grain of farmers bringing in their produce to the market, of goldsmiths busy at their work, of *jheers* fetching water in his *behngis*<sup>3</sup>, of village belles going to bring water from the well and of eager housewives waiting for their husbands. There are stone carvings again of tall mansions, shops, roads, carts, everything. It is as if some spiteful magicians in an angry moment had turned a full blooded, lively village into stone. But that is what happened in Dhanua centuries ago. It is a dreadful story.

Dhanua was called Dhanipur in ancient times. It used to be a beautiful township, with wide roads, bazaars and palaces. Dhanipur's King, Dhandev, was a wise, talented and kind ruler. His wife, Queen Mahadevi, was an extremely beautiful woman. The subjects of Dhanipur adulated the royal couple as Lord Indra and Indrani personified.

One day King Dhandev and Queen Mahadevi went to the hills of Mava for sport. Queen Mahadevi was very happy on seeing colourful flowers growing wildy on the hillside. The royal couple spent many days in the joyful surrounds.

Unknown to either King Dhandev or his queen, a *raakshas*<sup>4</sup> by the name of Mavadaitya dwelt in those hills. Mavadaitya was evil and lustful. Having

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1. Literally, a rock, a stone, here stone sculptures
  2. The hilly terrain across Riasi in Jammu region
  3. An implement made of a long strip of wood slung over a shoulder to carry weight hung from both its ends
  4. In this context, a demon



seen the King Dhandev frolicking with his beautiful wife, the *raakshas* became determined to win the queen for himself.



King Dhandev could not have remained indefinitely at Mava as he had to run his kingdom at Dhanipur. So he returned to his capital with Queen Mahadevi. The *raakshas* Mavadaitya also followed the couple incognito. He saw the palaces of both the king and his queen. It did not take him long to know that the king held court at the noon and the proceedings went on till evening.

One day, the wily *raakshas* took the garb of the king and entered the queen's palace. The queen took him to be her husband and the *raakshas* remained with her throughout the afternoon.

This became the practice. Mavadaitya would come to the Queen Mahadevi's palace in the garb of the king everyday and would remain there till the evening.

As luck would have it, one day King Dhandev dismissed his court early and arrived at his queen's palace. When he entered the queen's room, he found another man of his own appearance conversing intimately with his queen. The king concealed himself at once and hastened to approach the bed through another passage.

Patiently, he heard the exchange between his wife and the impostor. It gave him some satisfaction that his queen was innocent and had played no part in the deceit that had been played on both of them.

The king realized that the man who had taken his place beside the queen was very crafty. He drew his sword from the scabbard and walking on his toes to where the *raakshas* lay beside Mahadevi, he cut him down with one powerful blow.

Mayadaitya, it is said, emitted such a shrill scream before his death, that King Dhandev, Queen Mahadevi along with all sentient beings and insensate things present in Dhanipur, not to say the dying *raakshas* Mayadaitya himself, were turned into stone that very instant. People say that the sounds that winds blowing through the pines emit are in fact the voices of those long dead denizens of this village!



## *Suddh Mahadev*

**Sixty** six miles from Jammu lies the town of Chenaini. A five mile walk from this town takes one to Mount Gauri, which is as famed for its sanctity today as it was in the ancient times. This was the place where, in remote past, the Divine Mother Gauri had done severe penance so as to marry Lord Shiva, forcing the Lord to manifest himself before her. Much later, the sage Kashyap too had chosen this sacred place for doing austerities for appeasing Lord Mahadeva.

But to begin our story, Kashyap did not find much peace there. A demon by the name of Shuddhanta had forcibly occupied the land. He asked the sage to collect his belongings and leave the place. The holy man was too busy in his penitence to pay any heed to his tormentor. Seeing that his word had not left any mark on the frail looking mortal. Shuddhanta the demon, began putting hurdles in Kashyap's holy routine.

The sage was helpless before the demon's antics. He sent his disciples to Lord Shiva's abode to seek help. But when the novices arrived there, the Lord of Destruction was busy discussing the plan of evolving a new world order with the Lord of Creation, Brahma. How could they, poor mortals, muster courage enough to interrupt such weighty confabulations between the two mighty gods! Instead, they approached the Divine Mother, Parvati, and conveyed to Her their master's message. Goddess Parvati was furious on hearing of Shuddhanta's effrontery. Instantly, she accompanied Kashyap's disciples back to their hermitage. On reaching there, the Goddess first tried to reason with the demon, but when he refused to pay heed to Her, a fight ensued between them. However, the death-defying demon surpassed all the powers of the Goddess.

The news of such an ignominy could not have failed to reach Lord Shiva. He hurried to the scene. Now that Lord Shiva was in the battle field, who could fight him? Shuddhanta fell to the Lord's feet and asked for his salvation.



The Lord readily granted it to him. Then the demon, in utter humility, sought the pardon of Goddess Parvati and Her devotee, the sage Kashyap.



The munificent Lord Shiva was pleased with Shuddhanta for his meekness and asked him to seek a boon. The demon had now been transformed into a benign creature. All the rancour and conceit of his heart had left him. Desiring



a blessing for the public good, Shuddhanta told Lord Shiva that the hills men of the region found it hard to travel all the way to Haridwar to take a dip in the Holy Ganga. Would the Lord then be pleased to cause a sacred stream to flow in this place for their common good?

“So shall it be!” said Lord Shiva and soon enough a stream of sparkling water came gurgling down the hills. In time to come, this stream came to be known as Mother *Devaka*. People from the surrounding areas immerse the ashes of their deceased kin in the Holy *Devaka*. The spot on which Lord Shiva had appeared also became a place of pilgrimage and is called ‘Suddh Mahadev’.

## *Dawanu Shah, the Loan Shark*

**Dawanu Sháh** was renowned far and wide. He was a man of influence and respect. One day he had to go to Saruinsar in connection with an urgent business. A village Sakona fell in the way. A Brahmin of this village was an acquaintance of Dawanu Shah. The Shah asked the pundit for shelter for the night. The latter invited him to stay with him. Coming into the host's property,





Dawanu Shah saw a berry-tree in fruit. Ripe, red berries hung from its branches. His mouth watered at the sight. “Pantji,” he exclaimed, “what wonderful berries!”

“No problem, sir. I own the tree! May I pluck some berries for you?”

“But I don’t want to bother you!”

“Don’t mention, Shahji<sup>1</sup>! It’s great honour to have you with us!”

“But are you sure these berries are any good?”

“You’ve my word for it. This is the best variety you can find in the whole region.” The pundit was as proud of his berries as he was of the pair of his oxen. In a moment, he pulled one or two branches of the tree and collected enough fruit to present to his guest. The Shah then took his supper and spent the night in the pundit’s hut. In the morning when he was about to leave, he told the latter that it would be difficult for him to carry the berries with him and would the pundit be kind enough to scatter them over his roof to dry in the sun. He would pick them up on his way back home. The unsuspecting pundit nodded in affirmation as the Shah took his leave.

Two or three months passed away and Dawanu Shah did not turn up. The month of *Sawan* was at hand. When the pundit’s wife saw it was about to rain, she collected the berries from the roof and tied them in a piece of cloth. She kept the small parcel inside the house.

Dried berries are as sweet as dates. The children of the household started putting one or two berries in their mouth every time they chanced to be near the parcel. Gradually, they forgot that the parcel of berries was someone’s keepsake. The stock of the berries was also exhausted.

Then came the winter season, followed by the festival of Baisakhi. One day, as the pundit’s son was grazing his cattle in the meadow, he saw someone approaching his house. It was Dawanu Shah at last. The child was happy to recognize him. He went running to inform his father of the visitation. The Shah also approached after a while. Quickly surveying the rooftop, he asked his host directly, “*Panta*<sup>2</sup>, where have you kept those berries?”

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1. A formal address for a money-lender or a man belonging to trading community
  2. A distortion of ‘Pant’ or ‘Pundit’ – here used as a derogatory term



The pundit was nonplussed. Forcing a smile, he said, “Shahji, I suggest, you relax a bit first. This is not the time to talk of berries. In any case, we have eaten them up!”

The long trek had tired the Shah and he was not in a friendly mood. “What did you say? It is not a case of misappropriating someone’s keepsake? It’s a sin worse than thievery, I tell you! Once Lord Krishna while passing through a farmer’s field had eaten a grain – just one grain – and he had to undergo the punishment of going through two lakh births and rebirths to repay his debt! Now you tell me. Do you want to be a sinner? Do you want to wreck this life and the next because of your moral slackness?”

The pundit turned out to be a simple minded person. He said, “Shahji, you are right. But we don’t have berries during this season. We have wheat. You may take wheat if you please!”

The Shah answered, “As you wish. Keep aside two sackful of wheat for me. I will take them with me on my way back home.”

The Shah went again towards the mountainside. Many days passed. The paddy was about to be harvested. The pundit and his family had consumed all the wheat by then. It was at this time Dawanu Shah surfaced once again. when he asked for his quantity of wheat, the pundit could not meet his demand as he did not have any wheat with him. Afraid of the consequences, however the hapless peasant agreed to give him paddy in lieu of wheat. This time the Shah departed only after he had persuaded the pundit to put his thumb mark on a note of credit which he had written himself.

For the next one year, the Shah did not visit Sakona at all. Then one day he came to the village along with four or five of his stooges and demanded to be given two measures of paddy – one which he owed him and one additional measure by way of interest for one year. The pundit felt as if the earth was slipping from under his feet. His total harvest had amounted to just two measures of paddy. How could he give the entire crop to the Shah? He had to feed his family. He begged the money lender for mercy. The Shah agreed to give him six months time. “If in six months you are unable to repay your debt, then your farms and oxen will stand forfeited. Do you understand? Don’t expect



any further mercy from me. If you start wailing again, it will be a matter to be sorted out between you and the men of the Raja!”

Six months would pass in no time. The Pundit worried himself to sickness. But he could not think of a way out. There was no doubt that the Raja would also take side with the Shah. The Pundit stood all alone. One day, Dawanu Shah arrived with a dozen of hoodlums in the tow. One of them – an overblown fellow – was in the Raja’s service. Immediately on arrival, he drove the pundit and his family out of their home. Then he threw their humble belongings out of the house. The pundit cried piteously before Dawanu Shah, but to no avail. Unmoved by pity, the Shah appointed a *mhasha*<sup>1</sup> as his new tenant in place of the pundit and went back.

The fate of the pundit can only be imagined.

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1. A low-caste peasant

## *Supreme Sacrifice*

**Once** upon a time, a severe drought hit the countryside. The rivers and streams ran dry. Under an unrelenting sun, trees and plants shriveled up. Jungles, gardens or fields: there was nowhere one could see a green blade of grass. Men, women and children started dying of thirst and hunger. Alarmed, the people resorted to various devices to appease the angry gods. Householders performed ritual havans and yagnas. Little girls burnt their dolls, chanting:

*“We’ve burnt our dolls in pain,  
Dark Cloud, please bring us rain!”*

But rain it did not.

Then a holy man arrived in the village. Sitting on a platform outside the temple, he went into *samadhi*<sup>1</sup>. In that sublime condition, there was to be no eating or drinking for him. He spent several days in deep meditation. At last, he had a vision. A voice spoke to him that it would rain only if a living person was sacrificed in a hot oven.

The holy man called everyone in the village and said, “Brothers, for the sake of your collective welfare, one of you will have to sacrifice his life. Is there anyone among you willing to die so that others may live?” The assembled men looked at each other’s face but no one came forward for the deed. The holy man repeated his question again. And yet there was no one to answer him. It was the third time when the holy man called upon the villagers for the ultimate sacrifice that a child of 5-6 years came running to the him, “*Maharaj,*” said the little boy, “I’m ready to lay down my life for my people. Please cast me into the potter’s oven!”

The holy man had already envisioned that it would be no one but an innocent soul to come forth for the sacrifice. He greeted the boy

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1. Deep meditation



affectionately. But the people standing around them were awe struck by the boy's resolve. His mother began to cry, "A real mother is she," said the heroic child to his mother, "who bears a child for the service of the land. Why do you cry for me, Mother? You should hold your head in pride for me!"



The boy was cast into the potter's oven. The potter arranged the raw earthen pots round him and lighted the fire under the oven. He sealed it carefully for the pots to be properly fired. That day, the boy's mother did not eat anything, nor did she take a drop of water. She spend the day praying for her son.

On the fifteenth day, when the potter prepared to open his oven, the moon had risen in the sky. The whole village was on fast that day in honour of

the boy. The villagers were waiting to pay last respects to the martyr's remains when what they saw in the moonlight was the child coming unharmed out of the oven. It was a miracle. While the pots placed above the head of the boy had been well treated with fire, neither the boy himself, nor the earthen pots stacked round and underneath him in the oven had been touched by fire. As the thankful mother paid obeisance to gods, big drops of rain began falling from the sky.



## *A People's Destiny*

**Long** ago, a certain country fell in the grip of drought of a particularly severe kind that lasts twelve years. The sky became as dry as the eyes of a cruel man. Wells, tanks and springs went empty. Even the great water reservoirs started to dry up. The people prayed to gods for a respite, but to no avail. For two or three successive years, the farms did not yield the *Haar*<sup>1</sup> and the *Saawan*<sup>2</sup> crops. There was hue and cry from all directions. Starvation made people restless. The plants and creepers were scorched to tinder. The denuded slopes of once sylvan mountains became frightening to look at. It appeared as if the creation on the face of the earth was coming to an end.

It was during these harsh days in the mortal world that Lord Shiva descended from the Mount Kailash with Goddess Parvati. The Lord had cast aside His *Nada* as He had no desire to play the celestial musical instrument amid the all pervading misery. The Divine Couple happened to pass by the very spot which was worst affected by the drought. The place looked as forlorn as a cremation ground. Parvati had once seen lush greenery all the way. Now, seeing the utter barrenness of the scorched land, the Goddess was moved to tears. She turned towards Shiva and prayed, “Lord! What do I see here! What kind of a country is this! It doesn’t have even one green leaf! All the ponds and tanks have dried up and even the mud in them has split up. How would the human beings be faring in this place? I remember how this village had been full of gaiety when we had last come here.”

Shiva was amused. He said, “Gentle lady, this is the mortal world for you. It keeps changing. That’s its *dharma*. What can one say about this! Let’s get on with our walk.”

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1 and 2 – Months in the North-Indian calendar corresponding roughly to July–August

But walk they couldn't. Parvati was after all a woman. Who can stand before a woman's obduracy? She declared that she won't budge an inch until she was told the whole secret of the village's suffering. Lord Shiva gave in. "Parvati," he said, "now listen to me. This land will remain in drought for twelve long years. The whole countryside will become arid. The inhabitants are to die of starvation and those who survive shall suffer utter deprivation."

Parvati was dismayed on hearing Her Lord's dire words. "Enough! I've heard you about the drought. But, pray tell me, what's that object moving in the field?"





“Parvati, he is a peasant out there. The poor fellow is ploughing his field. He knows fully well that it’s no use tilling the land without a rainfall. But he is worried about future. What if he forgets the practice of ploughing the fields altogether during this period of despondence? The man is intent upon keeping alive the tradition.”

Now Parvati knitted her brows, pretending to be worried. “My Lord!” she said, “But how come you have set aside your *Naad* for all of twelve years, promising never to play it till rains. Won’t you forget how to play at it is just two or three years? It’s good that you tried it at least once or twice!”

Shiva took out his *Naad* and blew into it forcefully. On the very first note, dark clouds began gathering in the sky. Soon, it started to rain. It rained so heavily that every nook and corner was drenched. A new life sprang on the earth. The plants and trees gleamed in the life-giving water. The people’s faces alight with hope.

Tickled at her own little trick, Parvati asked Shiva, “*Maharaj*, now how do you explain this?” A while ago, you had foretold that this land would suffer drought for twelve years. But whence comes this rain?”

Shiva too shared His consort’s amusement. “Dear Parvati,” He said, “invincible is people’s destiny! Man’s fate changes even the Almighty’s order!”

## *A Marriage Party of Ghosts*

**Once** upon a time a Brahmin lad went to Kashi for learning. He spent many years at the sacred place, studying the Holy Scriptures. One day, on getting homesick, he sought his *guru's* permission and wended his way to his native village. During the course of his long journey, he would spend the night in any village that he had reached and be on his way again at the crack of the dawn. In this manner, the young priest was able to make himself of use to many a people in the countryside, willingly officiating at their rituals and ceremonies.

As God had willed, it fell dark when he approached the boundary of his own village. At a little height from the highway stood the house of a very old friend of his. The *Pant*<sup>1</sup> went straight to the house. After knocking at the door, he entered the room.

The *Pant's* friend lay on a bed. But strangely, he did not get up from his bed to greet his guest. Instead, he extended his arm and took off a *pattoo*<sup>2</sup> blanket for the latter to rest on. The *Pant* wondered at the unusual length of his friend's arm. But finding nothing amiss, he made himself comfortable and began talking. After a while, the host, while still reclining on his bed, poured out milk from the earthen pot hanging by the peg on the wall, and offered it to him to drink. Now the *Pant* gasped in fear. The host, however, requested him to finish the proffered milk, as they both had to go out to a marriage party, where the priest would have to solemnize the ceremony. The *Pant* took his milk with trembling hands. His suspicious was gradually turning into a belief that the man on the bed could be anything but his friend!

Taking great courage, the *Pant* asked the creature, "Brother, a suspicion has cropped up in my mind. So tell me frankly who you are? Unless you come out with the truth, I won't go anywhere with you, nor will I perform the

- 
1. A traditional form of address for a learned Brahmin
  2. Coarse woolen garment, woven in the form of a belt



marriage on your bidding.” The host replied sadly, “*Pantji*, I have been dead these last seven or eight years. When I died there was no one to cremate my body or to perform the prescribed rituals; and I ended up being a ghost. But you have nothing to fear from me. I’ll never harm you. Yes, I’ve one favour to ask you. Please do something for my salvation, if you can!”



They went on talking for some time. Then the ghost said, “Let’s go now. It’s our king’s wedding tonight. You may proceed homewards after sanctifying the marriage.”

They both embarked on the journey. On the way, they came across a carpenter who was carrying a wood scrapper on his shoulder. They took him along. The trio had barely crossed some wilderness, when they came across a



wonderful sight. Under the pitch-dark night-sky, a large ground lay brightly lit up by flames. Little imps danced around it blowing conches.

As they approached the ground, a smiling ghost spread a mat for them. Both the *Pant* and his ghost-friend sat on it, while the carpenter thought it better to keep standing. Then a score of bare-bodied ghosts appeared before them. Holding half burnt bones in their hands, they presented a fearful sight with their pitch black faces, glistening white teeth, snake-like arms, twisting and turning legs, heads as large as ripe melons and torsos covered with long hair. It was too much for the carpenter. The poor fellow would have died out of fright had not the *Pant* put him at ease with his soothing words.

The wedding feast was getting ready. *Khamiras*<sup>1</sup> were being fried and a variety of curries fragrant and promising to be tasteful, were being prepared. Just as the banquet was being laid, the groom, party arrived at the venue. The bridegroom, astride a buffalo-calf, was followed by several ghosts on foot. His face covered by a *sehra*<sup>2</sup> of flowers and he carried a *bainthi*<sup>3</sup> on his shoulder. His mount too was garlanded with *kakoroo* flowers.

An officious looking ghost then appeared before them. He asked the *Pant* to organize the *milni* of both the parties and directed the carpenter to oversee the job of erecting the *bedi*<sup>4</sup> for the bride and groom to take their vows. Meanwhile, the *baraat* sat down to a hearty meal, even as a few women-ghosts played pranks<sup>5</sup> with the groom's party. The *baraat* having eaten, the *Pant* and the carpenter also partook of the feast in the leaf-plates laid down before them. The priest then went on to solemnize the wedding ceremony.

After the conclusion of the ceremony, the two living men were each given a huge bundles of *mandle*<sup>6</sup>. When at last they were allowed to leave, the

- 
1. Leavened bread
  2. Decorative veil used by bridegrooms all over North India while proceeding to the bride's home for the nuptials
  3. A farming implement
  4. A ceremonial platform, traditonally made of bamboo—trunks and colourful buntings in which the marriage rituals are conducted.
  5. The women—folk on the bride's side deride the groom's kin during the marriage ceremony — the custom prevails even today in some tradition—bound Dogra families
  6. Delicacies prpared for distribution among the close relatives of the bride and the groom.



ghosts advised them to go straight to their homes without ever looking back. In return of the services the duo had performed, they gave them – in lieu of cash – wood shavings, which the carpenter had left on the ground while erecting the *bedi*.

The nightlong walk had tired both the priest and the carpenter and they planned to rest awhile at an appropriate place. The sun was about to rise. The people in the vicinity had also started to move about. Exhausted, the carpenter tumbled on a stone, causing his pack of cookies to spill out. The two companions were astonished to see what lay before their eyes. There was none of those puffy *bathuras*<sup>1</sup> or juicy *jalebies*<sup>2</sup> there, but a collection of raw and grisly bones. In disgust, the carpenter threw the bundle away. The *Pant* also followed suit. They then hastened to inspect their bundles of wood shavings. Here, another surprise awaited them! The bundles contained pieces of pure silver instead of useless wood slivers. The two men were happy at last. The carpenter made his way to his home with his new found riches. The *Pant*, however, mindful of the request made by his ghost-friend, made an about-turn and went directly to the holy city of Haridwar, to perform funeral rites of the deceased man so that his soul may rest in lasting peace.

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1. Leavened, puffy bread  
2. A popular confection of North India



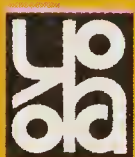






This book is a collection of some of the better known folk tales of the Dogras - a proud people inhabiting the region extending from Jammu to Himachal Pradesh in North India. In rendering into English these humorous, heart warming and occasionally sad snippets of the Dogra way of life, Suman K. Sharma has been successful in maintaining the flavour of the original tales in Dogri. Supplemented with evocative illustrations these tales should please the child in every one of us.

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